Terry Prince

The Architect's Shadow

Edgar Milvus

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Chapter 1: The Prodigy's Gambit

In the cavernous lecture hall of Eldergard Academy, where vaulted ceilings hummed with embedded mana conduits, Terry Prince stood at the heart of a containment circle etched into the obsidian floor. Holographic displays flickered around him, projecting a simulated dimensional rift—a churning maelstrom of shattered ether that echoed the scars left by the Sundering. The air buzzed with charged particles, static prickling the hairs on his arms like invisible needles. Terry adjusted the gauntlet on his right wrist, its circuits glowing with the blue pulse of converted mana, and flexed his fingers. This was his moment. "Watch closely," he said, his voice slicing through the murmurs of his classmates like a blade through mist. He shot a glance at Professor Harlan, the grizzled instructor whose robes bore the faded sigils of old-world arcana. "Your wards are brittle relics, Professor. Layered incantations that leak like a sieve. My Nexus-weave will seal

this without the fireworks." Harlan's jaw clenched, his knuckles blanching around the staff he gripped. "Arrogance blinds you, Prince. The ancients wove those wards with blood and foresight. Override them, and you invite instability." Terry smirked, the corner of his mouth twitching upward as he tapped a sequence into his gauntlet. Lines of runic code projected in mid-air, interfacing with the rift's edges. He channeled mana through the device, converting it into a stream of kinetic stabilizers—invisible threads that latched onto the vortex's fraying boundaries. The simulated tear buckled, its chaotic swirl compressing under the pressure. Sparks erupted where his weave clashed with the archaic barriers, but they held, the energy coiling tighter like a vice on writhing muscle. From the observation tier, Elara Voss leaned forward, her emerald cloak draped over the railing. Her fingers traced the grain of the wooden amulet at her throat, a habit born of unease. "Bold as ever," she murmured to Lirael Thorne beside her. Elara's eyes, sharp as hawthorn thorns, tracked Terry's every adjustment. She admired the precision, the way he tamed the wild with circuits and code, but a knot twisted in her gut. "He dances too close to the edge." Lirael crossed her arms, her storm-gray tunic whispering against the stone. A breeze seemed to stir around her, unbidden, ruffling the loose strands of her auburn hair. "He's brilliant, I'll grant him that. But dismissing the old ways? It's like challenging a thunderstorm with a lightning rod." Her boot tapped rhythmically on the floor, betraying the tactical doubt simmering beneath her calm facade. The rift stabilized with a resonant chime, the holographic tear folding inward until only a faint shimmer remained. The class erupted in a mix of applause and whispers. Terry straightened, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, his chest swelling under the attention. "See?" He turned to Harlan, gauntlet still humming. "No cataclysm. No Sundering echo. Just efficiency. Your chants might summon power, but they can't control it like this." Harlan stepped forward, his staff thumping against the floor. The impact sent a ripple through the containment circle, testing Terry's weave. "Efficiency? Boy, magic isn't a machine to be programmed. It's a living force—untamed, adaptive. Push it too far, and it pushes back." Terry's eyes narrowed, his posture shifting into a defiant lean. "Adaptive? That's code for unpredictable. The Sundering happened because fools like

your order relied on intuition over engineering. I respect the legacy, Professor, but it's time to evolve." Elara descended the steps, her boots soft on the stone, arriving just as the debate heated. She placed a hand on Terry's shoulder, her touch light but firm, grounding him. "Impressive work. But Harlan's not wrong about the risks. What if your override fractures under real pressure? We've seen rifts twist in ways no simulation predicts." Terry shrugged off her hand gently, though his gaze softened at her concern. "That's why we test it, Elara. You're the one who communes with roots and winds—trust me when I say this is the bridge between your wilds and my precision." He nodded toward Lirael, who had joined them, her presence carrying that faint ozone tang of restrained storm magic. "And you, Lirael—your tempests could use a targeting array. Imagine weaving lightning through a Nexus grid." Lirael arched an eyebrow, her lips pressing into a thin line as she circled the now-dormant rift. She extended a hand, palm up, and a small gust swirled around her fingers, probing the weave's seams. "Tempting. But I'd rather feel the storm's pulse than code it. Your method shines in theory, Terry. In the field? It might crack like dry earth." Their exchange drew chuckles from nearby students, a brief camaraderie amid the academy's rigid hierarchy. Terry clapped Lirael on the back, his grin widening. "Skepticism keeps me sharp. Stick around—you'll see it save us all one day." The hall's ambient hum shifted then, a subtle discordance threading through the mana conduits. Terry frowned, glancing at his gauntlet as its display flickered. Before he could query it, a low groan echoed from the walls— not the simulated rift, but something deeper, burrowing from the academy's underbelly. Alarms blared, crimson lights strobing across the chamber. "Breach detected! All personnel to defensive positions!" Harlan's voice boomed, his staff igniting with a flare of raw ether that scorched the air. The floor trembled, cracks spiderwebbing outward from the center. Terry's weave shattered like glass under a hammer, the simulated rift exploding into a real one—a jagged tear vomiting forth oily blackness. Riftblight seeped through, the substance coiling like liquid tar, crystallizing into pulsating shards that embedded in the obsidian with wet, sucking sounds. The smell hit first: ozone sharpened with the cloying sweetness of burnt sugar, turning stomachs. From the rift lunged the first abomination—a hulking form that had once been

a guardian beast, now warped beyond recognition. Its fur matted with fused metal plates, eyes bulging from sockets rimmed in crystalline growths. Bone spurs erupted from its spine, dripping corrosive sap that hissed on contact with the floor, etching pits into the stone. It bellowed, a guttural roar that vibrated through Terry's ribs, and charged, claws screeching against the ground. "Form up!" Terry barked, his gauntlet whirring to life. He thrust his palm forward, unleashing a lance of superheated plasma that struck the creature's shoulder. Flesh and metal vaporized in a burst of steam, the impact cratering the floor and sending shards flying. The beast staggered but pressed on, its mutated limbs pistoning with unnatural vigor. Elara drew her bow from her back, an enchanted curve of living yew that thrummed under her grip. She nocked an arrow tipped with herbal venom, loosing it in a fluid arc. The shaft burrowed into the creature's flank, vines erupting from the wound to ensnare its legs, roots burrowing into the blighted flesh with audible cracks. "It's feeding on the rift's edge—cut the source!" Lirael spun, her hands weaving patterns in the air. Wind howled from nowhere, coalescing into a razor-edged gale that sliced across the beast's hide, peeling away strips of corrupted skin in bloody ribbons. The air filled with the metallic tang of blood and scorched ozone, the ground quaking as more forms poured from the tear—swarms of smaller horrors, their bodies a grotesque fusion of chitin and rusted iron, skittering with wet, grinding noises. Terry dodged a swipe from the lead creature, rolling across the floor as its claws gouged furrows deep enough to spark against buried conduits. He rose, kinetic shield snapping into place around him—a shimmering barrier that deflected a hurled shard of blight, the impact jarring his arms like a sledgehammer blow. "Coordinated—this isn't random! Someone triggered it!" Harlan bellowed incantations, his staff slamming down to unleash a shockwave of brute force that bowled back a cluster of the smaller fiends, their bodies crumpling with bone-snapping crunches. But the rift widened, belching more blighted masses, the corruption spreading like veins across the hall's walls, twisting support beams into fleshy protrusions that wept oily fluid. Elara's next arrow whistled past Terry, embedding in a lunging spider-like mutant and exploding its abdomen in a spray of ichor that sizzled on the stone. She winced, the acrid stench burning her nostrils, and pressed closer

to him. “We need to seal it—your way, now!” Lirael summoned a torrent of lightning, bolts forking from her fingertips to chain through three assailants, their forms convulsing in electric spasms, metal segments glowing cherry-red before rupturing. The flash illuminated her gritted teeth, sweat beading on her forehead from the effort. Terry nodded, gauntlet overheating in his grasp as he reprogrammed on the fly. The rift’s edges resisted, the blighted shards pulsing defiantly, but he poured everything into the weave—plasma arcs bridging the tear, forcing it to contract with grinding reluctance. A final abomination barreled toward them, its maw unhinging to reveal rows of crystalline teeth, the air around it warping with hallucinatory heat that made Terry’s vision blur, phantom flames licking at his skin. With a roar, he overrode the last barrier, the rift slamming shut in a thunderclap of displaced air. The creature dissolved mid-leap, its form unraveling into dissipating sludge. Silence fell, broken only by heaving breaths and the drip of residual blight. But distant explosions rattled the academy’s foundations—more breaches, deeper in. Terry clenched his fist, the gauntlet’s glow fading. The fight had just begun.

Terry’s gauntlet hummed a dying whine as the last plasma threads fizzled against the sealed rift’s scar—a puckered seam in the air, still oozing faint wisps of acrid vapor. He shook out his wrist, the overheated metal biting into his skin like a fresh weld, and surveyed the hall’s wreckage. Shattered conduits sparked fitfully, casting jittery shadows over the sprawled husks of blighted fiends, their twisted limbs already crumbling into oily dust. Elara knelt nearby, her bow slung across her back as she plucked a spent arrow from a dissolved corpse, the fletching singed and limp. Lirael leaned against a buckled pillar, chest rising in ragged pulls, her fingers flexing as residual static crackled between them. Distant booms thundered anew, nearer now, vibrating the flagstones underfoot and sending loose debris pattering down from the vaulted ceiling. Terry’s jaw clenched; those weren’t structural failures. Sabotage. He pivoted toward the corridor branching left, where emergency lumens flickered red along the walls, their glow painting the stone in bloody hues. Right led to the instructors’ wing—safer, maybe, but clogged with evacuating students. Fleeing straight into the admin vaults below risked trapping them

in a collapse if the blasts propagated. No, left offered access to the auxiliary nexus hub; from there, he could reroute power to seal secondary breaches, buy time for a counter-weave. The danger? Blighted corruption might have already infiltrated the conduits, turning his own tech against him with feedback surges that could fry his nerves. “Left,” he barked, striding forward without waiting. His boots crunched over crystalline shards, each step grinding them finer. “Nexus hub’s our shot—reroute the grid, isolate the rifts before they metastasize.” Elara rose fluidly, nocking a fresh arrow tipped with glowing sap, her grip steady despite the quiver in her shoulders. She fell in beside him, eyes darting to the shadows pooling in alcoves. “Your call, Terry. But if it’s compromised...” Her words trailed as she glanced at Lirael, a subtle tilt of her head urging the other woman to move. Lirael pushed off the pillar with a grunt, wind-whipped hair sticking to her sweat-damp neck. She wiped a smear of ichor from her cheek, the stuff leaving a stinging trail like acid-etched ink. Her boots dragged for a beat, hesitation locking her in place as she eyed the rightward path—open doorways there funneled panicked shouts from the lecture halls, voices overlapping in a cacophony of fear. Rally the students? Her stormweave could shield a group, funnel them to the outer gates. But splitting up meant vulnerability; one bolt from an unseen attacker, and she’d be picking off mutants while Terry charged blind. The immediate goal clawed at her: get to high ground, assess the blast patterns from the observation spire. Peril lay in exposure—open corridors invited ambushes from whatever coordinated force had cracked the wards. She exhaled sharply, fingers curling into fists that sparked with ozone, and jogged to catch them. “Fine, but we’re not playing hero in the dark. Eyes on the vents—could be crawlers nesting.” The trio hustled down the left corridor, the air thickening with the tang of scorched wiring and that telltale burnt-sugar reek of Riftblight. Terry led, gauntlet raised, its emitters pulsing as he probed for energy spikes. A condescending curl tugged at his lip when he spotted a traditional ward-stone embedded in the wall ahead—its runes etched in faded silver, humming with outdated resonance. Archaic nonsense, meant to brute-force stability with raw mana flows. He jabbed a finger at it, plasma tip searing a clean override glyph into the surface. The stone shuddered, its glow inverting to a steady blue under

his weave, conduits nearby straightening with a metallic groan as power realigned. “See?” He shot the words over his shoulder, voice laced with that sharp edge of triumph. “No incantations, no rituals—just precision. Those old fools in the council chambers probably still chant to ‘appease the aether’ while the world frays.” Elara’s lips quirked in a half-smile, her steps light as she covered his flank, arrow trained on a grate hissing steam. She admired the efficiency, the way his tech bent chaos to order without the wild backlash of her herbal infusions. But Lirael’s scoff cut through, her boots stomping heavier to match pace. “Precision that nearly cooked us back there,” Lirael muttered, a vein pulsing at her temple as she summoned a faint breeze to clear the haze, the gust whipping grit from their path. Her free hand hovered near her quiver, debating a storm-laced shot to probe ahead—clear the junction, or conserve for the hub’s defenses? The peril of alerting hidden foes gnawed; a premature flash could draw a swarm. “Your ‘revolutionary’ override ignored the ward’s anchors. Felt that feedback? Like chewing glass in my veins.” Terry didn’t break stride, but his shoulders squared, a flicker of irritation narrowing his eyes. He weighed retorting—point out how her lightning chains had scorched half the hall, weakening the structure—or pressing on, let results silence her. Tangible goal: reach the hub intact, deploy the seal. He chose the latter, gesturing sharply at a side door. “Save the critique for after we don’t die. In—vents first.” They piled into a narrow service tunnel, the space cramped with humming pipes and flickering holoscreens displaying grid schematics. Elara wedged through first, her lithe frame slipping past a jutting valve, while Lirael squeezed after, grumbling as her elbow scraped rust. Terry brought up the rear, sealing the door with a kinetic pulse that fused its hinges in a shower of sparks. The tunnel sloped downward, walls vibrating with the academy’s core hum, but now laced with erratic jolts—breaches propagating, no doubt. Halfway down, a low gurgle echoed from the gloom ahead, like water bubbling through clogged drains. Elara froze, arrow drawn, her breath steadying as she scented the air—ozone, yes, but undercut with that cloying sweetness. Blight. Terry’s gauntlet whirred, projecting a lance of superheated plasma that pierced forward, illuminating a cluster of tendrils snaking from a cracked pipe. They writhed like veins, tipped with crystalline barbs that

dripped viscous fluid, the growths pulsing in rhythm with some unseen heart. “Mirage Stalker spawn,” Lirael hissed, her voice dropping to a tense rasp. No full beast, but offshoots—feline shadows flickering at the tendrils’ base, their forms refracting the plasma light into ghostly duplicates that danced along the walls. One illusion feinted left, claws phantom-scraping metal, while the real appendage lashed right, aiming for Elara’s ankle. She leaped back, loosing her arrow in a fluid arc; it struck true, the sap-tipped head blooming into thorny vines that ensnared the tendrils, crushing them with fibrous snaps. But the air warped, heat mirages blooming—phantom flames that seared Terry’s vision with illusory blisters, the scent of singed flesh flooding his nostrils where none burned. He staggered, blinking hard, the fake fire making his skin prickle as if branded. Lirael countered with a whip of wind, the gust shearing through the illusions and slamming the real shadows against the pipe, their forms convulsing in a spray of shattering prisms. Terry shook off the haze, recalibrating his shield to filter thermal distortions—a quick flux in the emitters, diverting energy to a cooling field that hummed against his forearm. The burn lingered in his lungs, a physical ache like inhaled embers, but he forged ahead, blasting the nest’s core. Plasma bored through, erupting the pipe in a geyser of steam and sludge that coated the walls in sizzling residue. “Nice shot,” Elara said, clapping his shoulder briefly, her touch grounding amid the steam. Loyalty in the gesture, unspoken but firm—she’d back his gambit, even if it scorched the path. Lirael snorted, wiping vapor from her eyes, but her stance shifted closer to his side, caution yielding to necessity. “Don’t get cocky. That was a scout—means the hub’s infested.” The tunnel opened into the nexus chamber, a cavernous vault ringed by colossal generators throbbing with caged energy. Consoles blinked erratically, screens fracturing with digital glitches as blight-veins crept across their surfaces, twisting circuits into vein-like filaments that wept conductive fluid. In the center, a secondary rift yawned—a jagged tear no wider than a doorway, but belching humid gusts laced with the gurgle of submerged horrors. From its depths slithered something vast: an Abyss Well abomination, its stone maw eroded into teeth of petrified shadow, bioluminescent slime coating the interior and birthing illusory faces that leered with deceptive smiles. Appendages

churned below, slick ropes questing upward, the air filling with a blistering miasma that clawed at their throats, inducing a parched rasp as if throats filled with sand. Terry's thoughts whirled: flank left via the generator stacks for cover, channel plasma through the conduits to overload the rift? Or bull-rush center, weave a direct seal but risk the appendages coiling around him? The latter tempted—quickest end—but those ropes moved like living cables, strong enough to crush bone. Goal: collapse the tear before it widened. He chose hybrid: left first, use the stacks as amplifiers. "Stacks—now!" He darted left, gauntlet linking to a panel with a magnetic snap, rerouting power in a surge that made the generators whine. Elara covered, her arrows pinning a rising appendage, vines erupting to bind it mid-thrash. Lirael unleashed a localized gale, the wind howling through the chamber to buffet the maw, forcing illusory faces to distort and pop like overripe fruit. But the well gurgled louder, a deceptive melody threading the air—lulling notes that twisted into screams only they could hear, phantom echoes rattling their eardrums until blood trickled from ears. Terry gritted through it, vision spotting with migraine spikes that hammered his skull like rivets. He poured the amplified weave, plasma arcs leaping from the stacks to bridge the rift, the edges contracting with a screech of tearing reality. The maw snapped, teeth gnashing inches from Lirael's boot before the tear imploded, appendages retracting in a wet slurp. The chamber fell still, save for the drip of slime from the ceiling. Terry unlinked his gauntlet, the recoil jolting his arm numb, and turned to face his companions. Elara nodded approval, while Lirael's glare softened to wary respect. But alarms blared anew—breaches in the outer wards. He pointed toward the exit hatch, already calculating the next vector.

Terry shoved the hatch open with a shoulder slam, the metal groaning under the force. Hinges squealed, releasing a blast of acrid smoke that stung his eyes and coated his tongue with the tang of scorched wiring. Beyond lay the academy's outer corridor—a labyrinth of reinforced bulkheads now buckled like crumpled foil, debris crunching underfoot as they spilled into the dim emergency lighting. Elara slipped through first, her bow already nocked, gaze probing the shadows with a predator's focus. She crouched low, fingers brushing a vine that snaked from her

quiver, coaxing it to unfurl along the wall for handholds amid the rubble. “Tight formation,” she murmured, her voice a low rasp that sliced through the klaxons. Her stance widened, boots grinding grit as she positioned to shield the flank—approval for Terry’s vector choice evident in the way she mirrored his path without question. Lirael followed, her cloak whipping in the draft from a shattered viewport. She flexed her fingers, summoning a faint crackle of static that danced along the floor like errant sparks, illuminating twisted rebar jutting from the ceiling like broken ribs. A skeptical huff escaped her as she eyed the conduit lines Terry had rerouted earlier, now flickering erratically. “Your amps held the well, but these wards? They’re fracturing like dry bark. We weave blind, we get pinned.” Her hand slammed a panel, sealing a side door with a burst of wind that banged it shut, her action underscoring doubt in his overreliance on tech without backup. Terry ignored the jab, his gauntlet humming as it interfaced with the corridor’s sensor grid. Data streamed across his HUD: hostile blips converging from the east wing, thermal flares signaling corrupted breaches. The air thickened with ozone and that cursed burnt-sugar reek, the blight’s signature fouling the recyclers. “East is compromised—reroute to service tunnels. Elara, mark the path. Lirael, clear the vents.” He bolted forward, boots thudding over shattered tile that shifted treacherously under his weight, forcing a zigzag to avoid a toppled lecture pedestal blocking half the hall. The corridor narrowed into a chute of exposed piping, steam hissing from ruptured lines like serpents’ breaths. Elara leaped onto a vine-laced girder, pulling herself up with retractable claws glinting in the red glow. She fired a single arrow ahead, the tip blooming into thorny roots that snagged a ventilation grate, yanking it free in a shower of sparks. “Clear— but it’s crawling with rot.” Her glance back was sharp, a subtle nod toward Terry’s lead, revealing trust in his calculations even as she adapted the terrain to her strengths. Lirael vaulted after, her gale-propelled jump sending a gust that scattered loose panels. She landed with a skid, one hand gripping a pipe for balance as the floor trembled. A low growl echoed from the duct—a corrupted hound, its fur matted with oily crystals, eyes glowing like fractured obsidian. It lunged, jaws unhinging to reveal fangs elongated into serrated blades. Lirael thrust her palm forward, unleashing a compressed air hammer that smashed

into its flank. The impact cratered the wall behind, bone shards spraying as the beast yelped and crumpled, its body twitching with residual spasms. “Too many angles,” she barked, wiping ichor from her sleeve, her clenched fist betraying frustration at the multiplying threats Terry’s plan hadn’t fully anticipated. They dropped into the service tunnel, a claustrophobic vein of conduits and flickering pipes, the walls slick with condensation that beaded like sweat. Terry’s plasma lance ignited with a whine, casting blue-white light that revealed the corruption spreading: metal panels bubbling into fleshy protrusions, veins of black crystal pulsing like exposed arteries. The ground shuddered anew, nearer this time—footfalls of something heavier. “Fan out,” he ordered, diverting energy to erect a shimmering kinetic barrier, the field humming as it deflected a falling chunk of ceiling that crashed down in a plume of dust. Elara pressed against the left wall, her arrows whistling in quick succession. One struck a slithering tendril emerging from a grate, the shaft erupting in acidic sap that sizzled through the appendage, severing it with a sizzle of evaporating fluid. She pivoted, loosing another to anchor a climbing vine across a chasm where the floor had collapsed into a yawning pit, the drop echoing with distant, wet churns. “Bridge secure—move!” Her words were clipped, a gesture toward the vine showing her endorsement of Terry’s evasion over confrontation, even as she fortified the escape. But Lirael hesitated at the pit’s edge, her eyes narrowing at the dark below. Then a blistering wave crashed over her—not wind, but a sensory barrage from the rift’s echo. Illusory flames licked at her vision, the tunnel warping into a furnace where walls bled molten slag. She staggered, knees buckling under a nausea that roiled her gut like swallowed thorns, the metallic bite of phantom blood filling her mouth. “It’s... twisting the air,” she growled through gritted teeth, shaking her head to dispel the haze. Her counter came fierce: a churning maelstrom that sucked in the hallucinatory heat, grounding it into harmless eddies of dust. She grabbed the vine, hauling herself across with wind-assisted pulls, her knuckles blanching—her urgent pull urging haste despite the disorientation. Terry crossed last, his barrier flickering as another quake sent cracks spiderwebbing the tunnel floor. They emerged into the academy’s perimeter yard, a sprawl of manicured hydrogardens now ravaged: trees twisted into towering, thorned hulks,

their branches lashing like whips under the rift's influence. In the distance, the outer walls breached—gaping wounds where hulking figures in tactical gear, augmented with rift-forged implants, directed swarms of mutated beasts. One creature barreled toward them: a former security drone, its chassis warped into a titan of jagged alloy and sinew, wheels fused to clawed limbs that gouged furrows in the earth. Its core vented steam laced with that ozone-sugar stench, optics blazing red as it charged. "Flank it!" Terry roared, his lance firing a superheated bolt that seared through a forelimb, molten metal spraying in a fountain that sizzled on the grass. The impact staggered the abomination, but it wheeled, tail whipping to shatter a nearby fountain into shrapnel that peppered the air. Elara rolled aside, her enchanted arrow piercing the drone's underbelly where flesh had overgrown circuits. Vines exploded from the wound, coiling to jam its gears with a grinding screech. She dashed to a toppled statue for cover, nocking another shot—her fluid dodge echoing Terry's aggressive weave, adapting it to her precision strikes. Lirael summoned a torrent of lightning, the bolt arcing from her fingertips to fork into the beast's frame. Electricity danced across warped plating, fusing joints in pops of blue fire that lit the yard like a storm's heart. The ground shook as the drone toppled, but not before its claw raked the earth near her, sending her sprawling into a thorned bush. Thorns tore at her cloak, drawing thin lines of blood, yet she rose with a snarl, channeling a shockwave that pulverized the remains into slag. "Your plasma opened it— but we need roots, not just fire," she snapped, brushing dirt from her arms, her pointed shove toward the breached wall revealing impatience with his solo tactics. More assailants crested the wall: soldiers with gauntlets pulsing rift energy, their armor sprouting crystalline spikes. Bullets whined, ricocheting off Terry's shield in sparks that heated the air to blistering. He countered with a kinetic pulse, the force rippling outward to hurl two attackers into a vine-choked trellis, bones cracking on impact. Elara's arrows felled another, her shots weaving through the chaos to pin a rifle arm to a post. Lirael's gale scattered the rest, whipping debris into a blinding maelstrom that forced retreats. But the rift at the wall widened, birthing fresh horrors: felinoid silhouettes warped by corruption, their bark-patterned fur now encrusted with oily shards, claws extended into scythes. They leaped

from the tear, landing with predatory grace amid the gardens' ruins. Terry's HUD blared warnings—coordinated pulses from the attackers' implants syncing with the rift's expansion. A conspiracy's hand, clear as the corruption spreading at their feet. He pivoted, gauntlet overclocking to channel a plasma grid across the yard, the lattice igniting in a web of searing lines that bisected the advancing pack. Feline shrieks pierced the din as bodies charred, the smell of burnt fur mingling with the ever-present rot. Elara bound survivors with thorny lassos, her pulls efficient, while Lirael battered the rift's edge with wind fists, each blow cratering the stone and contracting the tear with groans of stressed earth. The lead soldier bellowed orders, his voice amplified over the fray: "Seal the breach—protocol Omega!" But Terry's grid overloaded their implants in a chain of explosions, sparks erupting like fireworks as the man clutched his head, veins bulging under corrupted skin. Exhaustion clawed at them—the air heavy, lungs burning from miasma and exertion. Terry's arm throbbed from the recoil, vision blurring at the edges. Yet the rift stuttered, edges fraying under their combined assault. Elara vaulted a fallen log, arrow ready for the next wave. Lirael braced against a buckled wall, static crackling anew. Terry linked to a nearby pylon, rerouting academy power in a final surge. The tear buckled, imploding with a thunderclap that flattened nearby foliage. Silence fell, broken only by distant echoes of the assault. Terry unlinked, staggering a step as the pylon sparked. He surveyed his companions—Elara wiping sweat from her brow, Lirael sheathing a dagger with a resolute click. The yard smoldered, a testament to their stand, but shadows lingered at the horizon. He jabbed a thumb toward the inner academy spires, urging them onward through the debris.

Elara nodded sharply, her bow slung over one shoulder as she kicked aside a charred branch, its embers scattering like fleeing insects. She fell in beside Terry, her boots crunching over fractured flagstones slick with rift corruption. The oily sheen clung to the ground, bubbling faintly where it met her soles, forcing her to sidestep with deliberate care. Lirael brought up the rear, her fingers flexing around the hilt of her dagger, gaze probing the treeline where smoke curled from toppled statues. Terry led the way, his gauntlet buzzing faintly as it recalibrated,

servos whirring to vent excess heat. The inner spires loomed ahead, their crystalline facets reflecting the dying light of the assault—twisted mirrors of the academy's former glory. But the path twisted through the outer gardens, now a labyrinth of uprooted hedges and splintered benches. He paused at a fork, HUD overlay flickering: left led through a gazebo's wreckage, exposed but direct; right veered into denser foliage, shadowed and potentially ambushed. The exposed route risked sniper fire from the walls—his probe detected residual heat signatures there. The shadows offered cover but could hide mutated stragglers, their scythe-claws itching for flesh. Goal: reach the central nexus chamber, seal any secondary breaches before the conspiracy's puppets regrouped. He chose the foliage, gesturing with a quick slash of his hand. Elara melted into the underbrush first, her form blending with the leaves as if the plants themselves parted for her. They forged ahead, branches snapping underfoot, the air thick with the tang of sap and lingering ozone. Terry's arm ached, a deep bruise pulsing from wrist to elbow where the plasma grid's feedback had hammered home. He ignored it, focusing on the terrain—duck under that low limb, pivot around the thorn-choked fountain. Elara signaled a halt, her hand raised, palm flat. A low growl rumbled from the thicket ahead, not feline this time, but something bulkier, its breath heaving like a bellows. Lirael crouched low, wind coiling around her boots in visible eddies, ready to propel her into a leap. Terry's gauntlet cycled up, projecting a holographic scan: a hulking form, once a garden golem perhaps, now bloated with corruption. Its stone limbs had warped into veined tentacles, tipped with barbs that dripped black ichor. The thing lumbered into view, uprooting a sapling with a casual swipe, the trunk splintering into wet chunks. It fixed on them, eyes—glowing fissures in its crusted hide—narrowing. Terry assessed tactics: blast it outright, risk drawing attention with the flash; or flank, let Elara's vines ensnare while Lirael hammered from afar. The direct shot could crack its core, but the beast's mass might absorb it, closing distance before they repositioned. He opted for the flank, whispering coordinates into his comm. "Elara, bind the legs. Lirael, high ground—shatter the joints." She moved like mist, vines erupting from the soil at her gesture, coiling around the golem's ankles with a creak of straining rock. The creature roared, a sound like

grinding gravel, and yanked free, hurling a boulder their way. Terry dove left, the stone smashing into a tree behind him, bark exploding in a shower of splinters that peppered his back like hail. Pain flared across his shoulders, sharp and stinging, but he rolled to his feet, gauntlet firing a kinetic pulse. The shield bloomed, invisible force rippling the air, deflecting the golem's flailing tentacle. The impact jarred his bones, teeth clacking together as vibrations shot up his arm. Lirael scaled a nearby oak in a gust-assisted bound, perching on a limb that bowed under her weight. She thrust both hands forward, summoning a compressed air hammer— not a gentle breeze, but a battering ram of wind that slammed into the golem's knee. Stone cracked audibly, fissures spiderwebbing outward, and the beast staggered, one leg buckling with a thunderous snap. It swiped blindly, tentacle whipping through the air, but Elara was already circling, her arrows loosed in rapid succession. Each tip, etched with growth runes, burrowed into joints, forcing unnatural sprouts that pried at the seams. Sap-like fluid oozed from the wounds, mixing with the corruption to form corrosive foam that ate into the golem's base. Terry closed in, plasma lancing from his gauntlet—not a wild spray, but a focused beam that bored into the creature's chest. The stone glowed cherry-red, then molten, dripping in globs that sizzled on the grass, carving shallow pits. The golem thrashed, a tentacle grazing his side, the barb scoring his jacket and drawing a line of fire across his ribs. He gasped, breath hitching as the fabric tore, but intensified the assault, overclocking the beam to widen the hole. Heat washed over him, singeing his hair, the smell of superheated rock choking the air. It collapsed in stages—knee shattering fully under Lirael's next gust, torso slumping as Terry's plasma chewed through supports. Elara finished it, a final vine spearing the core, twisting until the fissures erupted in a spray of pulverized gravel. The golem went still, a steaming heap amid the trampled garden, its corruption pooling outward like spilled ink. They gulped air, chests heaving. Elara pressed a hand to her thigh where a barb had nicked her, green light flickering from her palm to knit the shallow gash, but her jaw clenched, a flicker of strain in her eyes. Lirael dropped from the branch, landing with a puff of disturbed leaves, her hair windswept and wild. She wiped grime from her cheek, smearing it into a dark streak, and shot Terry a glance—half admiration,

half rebuke, her lips pressing thin. Terry deactivated his gauntlet, the hum fading to a whisper. His side burned, ribs protesting each inhale, but he waved off concern, pointing to the spires now visible through the cleared path. “Conspiracy’s deeper in. That rift sync wasn’t random—their implants were keyed to academy frequencies.” Elara fell into step, her voice low, edged with that quiet resolve. “Whoever’s pulling strings knew our defenses inside out. Your grid fried their tech, but they’ll adapt.” Lirael snorted, sheathing her dagger with a decisive snap. “And we’ll be waiting. But next time, Prodigy, maybe don’t play hero with the pylon. Nearly cooked us all.” He smirked, the corner of his mouth twitching despite his bruised lip, but said nothing, eyes on the horizon. The spires rose like jagged teeth, their bases ringed by flickering barriers—some intact, others flickering erratically. As they crested a rise, the academy’s heart unfolded: the grand atrium, a dome of woven aether-glass now cracked, shards glinting like fallen stars. Below, figures moved— not students, but armored intruders, their suits etched with unfamiliar sigils, hauling crates toward a secondary tear in the floor. This one pulsed wider than the last, birthing wisps of black vapor that twisted into serpentine forms, scales glinting with embedded crystals. Alarms blared anew, klaxons wailing from hidden speakers. Terry’s HUD lit up: bio-signs spiking, rift instability at critical. The intruders turned, rifles raising in unison, barrels glowing with charged mana-cells. Elara nocked an arrow, Lirael summoned a maelstrom at her feet, propelling dust into a veil. Terry’s gauntlet whirred to life, energy coiling for a shield wall. But from the tear slithered the first serpent, coils undulating over the atrium’s marble, fangs dripping corruption that etched smoking trails into the stone. It reared, hood flaring wide, and lunged toward the nearest defender—a young cadet frozen in terror. The cadet screamed as fangs sank in, body convulsing, skin bubbling into armored plates before he slumped, eyes glazing over in corrupted fury. He rose, turning on his fellows with claws sprouting from fingertips. Terry cursed under his breath, recalibrating his aim. The serpents multiplied, three now, their hisses blending with gunfire. Elara’s arrow struck true, piercing a hood and pinning it to a pillar, the impact spraying ichor that sizzled on contact. Lirael hurled a lightning fork, the bolt arcing to chain between coils, electrocuting scales into brittle shards that

rained down, clattering like broken glass. One serpent thrashed in death, tail whipping to shatter a console, sparks erupting in a fountain that ignited nearby tapestries. Terry fired a plasma arc, the beam slicing a head clean off, the stump cauterizing in a burst of steam. But the body writhed on, headless and relentless, barreling toward him. He sidestepped, the coils slamming into the wall beside him, cracking masonry into chunks that bruised his thigh as they fell. Pain lanced up his leg, forcing a limp, but he countered with a kinetic shove, the force rippling to hurl the corpse into its kin, tangling them in a writhing mass. The intruders pressed, bolts of energy scorching the air, one grazing Lirael's arm and blistering skin red, drawing a hiss from her as she clutched it, wind faltering for a beat. Elara vaulted a balustrade, vines lashing out to trip a shooter, his fall ending in a crunch against steps. Terry linked to a wall panel, siphoning power for an EMP burst—circuits in the rifles fried, weapons dropping from spasming hands, but the soldiers switched to blades, corrupted edges gleaming. They fought through the atrium's chaos, dodging fallen beams and skidding over polished floors now veined with corruption. Terry's vision swam from exertion, sweat stinging his eyes, but he spotted the nexus core ahead—a pulsating orb of contained energy, its casing breached. The lead intruder, a tall figure in ornate plating, hovered a hand over it, chanting in a guttural tongue that widened the tear further. Elara whispered, fierce and tense, "We end this here. Your weave, Terry—seal it." He nodded, gauntlet interfacing with the core's port, code streaming in a digital torrent. But the figure turned, eyes locking on them, and raised a staff crackling with stolen storm essence. Lightning gathered, not Lirael's controlled fury, but a wild cascade promising to rend flesh from bone. Lirael stepped forward, her own gale rising to meet it, winds clashing in a maelstrom that tore at clothing and hurled debris skyward. Elara covered, arrows felling two flankers, their bodies crumpling with throats pierced, blood pooling dark. Terry poured everything into the seal, the core humming violently, rift edges contracting with pops of displaced air. The staff wielder bellowed, unleashing the bolt. It forked, slamming Lirael back against a column—her body arched, muscles seizing as electricity coursed through, charring the air with the scent of ozone and seared cloth. She slid down, gasping, chest heaving in ragged

bursts, fingers twitching. Elara cried out, lunging to her side, but more serpents emerged, drawn by the disturbance. Terry locked the seal tight, the tear snapping shut with a vacuum whoosh that sucked in nearby papers and extinguished flames. Silence gripped the atrium, broken by the intruder's retreating footsteps toward a side door. He pursued, plasma ready, but Elara hauled Lirael up, the stormweaver's arm slung over her shoulder, face pale and slick with sweat. "She's stable," Elara said, voice tight, "but we can't linger." Terry glanced back—the core stabilized, but the intruder's sigil burned into his mind, a mark of deeper machinations. They staggered toward the exit, the weight of conspiracy heavier than any corruption. Yet as they crossed the threshold, a fresh tremor shuddered the foundations—not from the rift, but from below, as if the earth itself hungered to split open.

Chapter 2: Riftwake Pursuit

Terry's boots skidded on the slick ferrocrete as he vaulted over a buckled grate, the corridor ahead fracturing like brittle bone under the academy's groans. Shards of corruption—those oily black crystals—jutted from the walls, pulsing with an inner throb that sent vibrations up his calves. Elara supported Lirael's weight on her left side, the stormweaver's arm slung across her shoulders, while Lirael's right hand clutched a makeshift splint around her singed ribs. Blood speckled Lirael's lips, but her jaw clenched, gaze probing the gloom for the armored figure's retreating silhouette. "Left fork," Terry hissed, pointing to a service duct half-obscured by writhing tendrils of corruption. The leader had vanished there moments ago, his powered exosuit's thrusters leaving scorch marks that reeked of ozone and char. Fleeing right meant exposed piping overhead, likely to rupture with the next tremor—pipes that could spew superheated steam or worse, corruption-infused slurry. Left risked tighter confines, where mutations could ambush from blind corners, but it shaved distance to the underbelly's core. Terry gauged the squeeze: his slimmer frame could slip through, but Elara hauling Lirael might snag. No time to reroute; the distant rumble swelled, threatening cave-ins. He ducked into the duct first, plasma emitter

humming in his grip. The air thickened, sulfurous and cloying, as if the walls exhaled decay. Behind him, Elara murmured a sylvan incantation, vines uncoiling from her bracers to brace Lirael's form, easing the drag. "Keep pressure on that wound," she said, her voice steady despite the strain etching lines around her mouth—fingers digging into Lirael's tunic to stem the seep. A skittering echoed from the duct's depths, like nails on rusted iron. Terry froze, emitter raised. From a fissure ahead, a clutch of mutations erupted: fist-sized horrors, their carapaces fused with jagged metal shards, mandibles clicking in frenzy. They swarmed the floor, oily trails smearing behind them as they corroded the grating into pitted sludge. Terry's thoughts whirled—blast them outright and risk the duct's collapse from the recoil, or lure them into a choke point for a focused pulse? The pressing goal: clear the path without burying them alive. He chose containment, slamming his free palm against the wall to activate a runic subroutine. A kinetic barrier flickered to life, a shimmering wall of compressed air that funneled the swarm into a narrow stream. "Plasma lance—now!" he barked to Elara. She nodded, drawing her bow in a fluid arc, an arrowhead blooming with verdant thorns that she loosed through the barrier's gap. The shaft struck the lead mutant, exploding in a spray of acidic sap that melted two more into bubbling husks. Terry followed with a targeted bolt from his emitter, superheated plasma searing a crater through the cluster. The survivors scattered, their bodies twitching as corruption crystals fractured, releasing puffs of acrid smoke that stung his eyes. The barrier held, but cracks spiderwebbed across it from the heat backlash. They forged ahead, emerging into a broader tunnel where the floor sloped into darkness. Here, the corruption dominated: veins of black ooze webbed the ceiling, dripping in viscous globs that sizzled on contact with stone, birthing fistulous growths that writhed like severed nerves. Lirael coughed, her breath ragged, but she shoved free of Elara's grasp to summon a gust—wind whipping through the tunnel to scatter the drops before they could pool and ensnare their feet. Her face paled with the effort, sweat beading on her brow, but she gripped her staff tighter, knuckles blanching. A trap triggered as Terry's boot depressed a concealed plate: holographic emitters flared to life along the walls, projecting grainy feeds of lab footage. Figures in hazard suits

injected corruption samples into test subjects—soldiers, by their insignia—watching as flesh warped into metallic spines, eyes glazing with feral hunger. A voiceover crackled: "... Phase Two viable. Weaponize the corruption for multiversal deployment. The Academy's vaults hold the key—Prince lineage complicit." The projection stuttered, then died as Elara shattered the nearest emitter with a hurled dagger infused with entangling roots. Terry's gut knotted, but he forced it aside, jaw clenching as he surveyed for more threats. His lineage? Father had been a runic engineer, vanished years ago in a "containment breach." No time to dwell; the leader's trail—faint boot prints in the ooze—veered downward. "That bastard's heading for a sanctum. We cut him off." The tunnel narrowed again, forcing them to sidestep bulging tumors of stone-flesh hybrids that pulsed with trapped heartbeats. Seismic tremors mounted, dislodging chunks of ceiling that crashed in cascades of dust and debris. Elara shielded Lirael from a falling slab, her shoulder taking the brunt—fabric tearing, skin abrading raw. She grunted but didn't falter, retaliating by coaxing moss from the walls to form a cushioning mat underfoot, muting their steps. Hallucinatory swarms assailed them next: wisps of corruption manifesting as spectral insects, their wings a blur that induced vertigo. Terry swatted at phantoms that buzzed his face, only for his hand to pass through ether, but the distraction nearly cost him—a real collapse from above, ferrocrete buckling to block the rear. He dove forward, rolling to his feet and firing a plasma grid that vaporized the debris mid-fall, molten droplets scattering like fiery rain. Elara and Lirael scrambled through the gap, Lirael's wind shoving the fragments aside just as the tunnel sealed behind with a thunderous crunch. They spilled into a cavernous chamber, the air buzzing with charged particles, static prickling his skin. At its center, the armored leader knelt before a ritual circle etched in glowing runes, his exosuit's panels open to reveal a pulsating corruption core. He chanted, voice amplified through vocoders, drawing power from the circle. The floor trembled as a titanic rift guardian awakened: a towering abomination, its form a hulking mass of fused bone and machinery, limbs like battering rams terminating in crystal claws that gouged furrows into the stone. It reared, bellowing a roar that shattered nearby stalactites, raining razor shards. "Containment protocols!" a voice shouted from the

shadows—academy remnants, a squad of five: two engineers with arc-welders, a medic hauling a cryo-cannon, and two guards brandishing vibro-lances. Their leader, a grizzled instructor named Harlan, locked eyes with Terry. “Prince, your weaves—we need ’em. That thing’s keyed to the nexus!” Terry assessed: charge the guardian head-on, and its claws would pulverize them; flank via the chamber’s ledge, but the drop risked Lirael’s collapse. Alliance meant coordinating strikes—his plasma to weaken the hide, their tech to pin it. Peril: the beast’s thrash could trigger a chain reaction, widening the rift beneath. Goal: sever the ritual link first, starve the guardian of corruption. Elara loosed a volley of thorn-arrows that embedded in the guardian’s flank, roots burrowing to erupt in geysers of sap that corroded armored plates, peeling them back in smoking curls. Lirael, leaning on her staff, channeled a lightning torrent—bolts arcing from her fingertips to slam into the beast’s core, eliciting spasms that cracked the floor into fissures. The engineers fired their welders, beams lancing to fuse the guardian’s legs in place, while the guards harried its sides with vibro-strikes that sparked against bone. Terry wove his nexus, fingers dancing over a portable console to convert ambient mana into an energy shield dome that deflected the guardian’s sweeping tail, the impact reverberating through his arms like a sledgehammer. He glimpsed the leader rising, core in hand— and an insignia on his pauldron: a stylized prince’s crown, matching the one from his father’s old toolkit. Betrayal burned in Terry’s chest, fueling his next weave. He overclocked the console, unleashing a barrage of plasma lances that pierced the guardian’s maw, superheating its innards until ichor boiled forth in a scalding flood, melting channels through the stone. The beast thrashed, shattering the ritual circle in a burst of wild energy. The leader fled toward a side vent, but Harlan’s squad intercepted, cryo-blasts encasing his legs in frost. As the guardian toppled, its titanic frame slamming down to crater the chamber floor, a multiversal echo rippled outward—a shockwave of distorted space that warped the air, pulling at the walls like invisible hooks. Distant howls echoed from beyond, external forces converging. Terry deactivated his console, chest heaving, and turned toward the vent, emitter charging with a whine. Elara hauled Lirael upright, vines retracting, while the remnants regrouped, weapons trained on the echo’s fading pulse.

Harlan clapped Terry's shoulder, but Terry shrugged it off, gaze sharpening on the frost-bound leader. "Talk. Now."

The frost-bound leader snarled, his armored knees locked in a crystalline sheath that spiderwebbed across the chamber floor. Shards of ice glinted under the flickering emergency lumens, reflecting the oily sheen of rift corruption pooling nearby. He twisted against the restraints, pauldron creaking, but the cryo-field held firm, numbing his limbs with a creeping chill that turned his fingers blue at the tips. Terry edged nearer, emitter humming in his grip, its barrel warm from the recent discharge. The air reeked of scorched ichor and ionized metal, an acrid tang that clung to his throat. "That crown on your shoulder," he said, voice low and edged, jabbing the emitter toward the insignia—a gilded circlet etched into the plasteel. "It's not academy issue. Where did you get it?" Harlan's squad formed a loose semicircle, vibro-blades humming at low idle, their faces smeared with grime and sweat. One guard, a wiry woman with a scarred jaw, prodded the leader's helm with her boot, eliciting a muffled grunt. Elara knelt beside Lirael, who slumped against a toppled pillar, her storm-gray tunic singed at the edges and her auburn hair matted with perspiration. Elara's fingers worked deftly, pressing a poultice of crushed glowfern to Lirael's electrocution scars—red welts that pulsed with residual static, making the air around them crackle faintly. The leader's visor fogged with his ragged breaths. "You think a symbol means anything, boy? Your father's ghost won't save you." He spat the words through gritted teeth, frost flaking from his lips. Terry's jaw clenched, a muscle twitching along his cheek. He crouched, close enough to feel the chill radiating from the man's suit. The crown emblem—it matched the faded engraving on the old runic toolkit in his dorm, the one his father had left behind before vanishing into the outer colonies fifteen years ago. A toolset for "stabilizing the veins," his father had called them, back when Terry was a kid tinkering with mana circuits in their hab-unit. "My father? You knew him?" A bark of laughter escaped the leader, distorted by the helm. "Prince. Arrogant name for an arrogant man. He wove the first veins—tunnels to siphon the corruption, turn it into power. But he got cold feet when we saw the potential. Weaponized corruption. Armies that don't break,

don't tire." His eyes, visible through the visor's slit, gleamed with fanatic zeal. "The Sundering wasn't a mistake. It was a gift. And your old man's blueprints? They're the key to unleashing it proper." Elara's head snapped up, her emerald gaze sharpening as she bound Lirael's poultice with a vine tendril that writhed like a living cord. "Blasphemy. The corruption devours everything—flesh, stone, worlds. You've poisoned the academy to prove what? That madness can be harnessed?" Lirael stirred, wincing as she pushed upright, her staff scraping against the cratered floor. A sharp inhale escaped her—each breath pulling at the raw patches on her arms, where the lightning backlash had seared skin into blistered furrows. "Harnessed?" she rasped, lightning flickering erratically between her knuckles. "You idiots cracked the rifts wider. Those abominations outside—they're your 'gift'?" The leader's gaze flicked to the vent he'd tried to flee through, where the multiversal echo's distortion still lingered, warping the metal edges into wavy mirages. "The ritual was just the start. The veins run deep—old Sundering scars, laced with corruption. We pump it, shape it. Implants for soldiers, drones for the front lines. The academy's nexus? Perfect conduit." He leaned forward as much as the frost allowed, voice dropping to a conspiratorial hiss. "Your father's crown marked the founders. He built the prototype in '68, after that mess on Titan. Fracture scattered the hydrocarbons, but the rifts? They bloomed. He sealed one, but we... we opened them all." Terry's fingers clenched around the console at his belt, knuckles blanching. The personal sting jolted like a feedback surge—his father's legacy, twisted into this. Betrayal twisted in his gut, hot and roiling. He activated a probe from his emitter, a thin beam sweeping the leader's pauldron. Data flickered on his wrist display: encrypted logs, schematics of vein networks snaking beneath Eldergard, converging on a core chamber. "You're not fleeing alone. There's a mastermind pulling strings. Who?" Before the man could retort, the chamber trembled—a deep groan from the walls, like stone grinding over bone. Corruption veins, exposed by the guardian's collapse, pulsed brighter, the oily blackness seeping faster, crystallizing into thorny lattices that snagged at boots and hems. From the distortion in the vent, a hallucinatory swarm erupted—not solid, but illusions laced with corruption spores that tickled the air with false itches, whispering

doubts into ears. Harlan barked an order, his squad raising shields as phantom insects buzzed, their wings an iridescent haze that made one guard claw at his neck, drawing blood from imagined stings. “Illusory corruption! Don’t engage—it’s bait!” But the real threat followed: the floor buckled, a section collapsing into a yawning pit where tendrils of corruption lashed upward, wrapping around a guard’s ankle. He yelped, vibro-blade severing the grasp, but the tendril’s acid bite ate through his boot, blistering flesh into weeping sores that smoked on contact with air. “Move!” Terry bellowed, slinging Lirael’s arm over his shoulder. Her weight dragged at him, her body trembling from the strain, but she conjured a gale that propelled them toward a side archway—intact tunnels branching into the underbelly. Elara covered their retreat, unleashing a volley of thorn-arrows that rooted into the swarm’s core, the illusions shattering like glass under the barrage, real sap bursting to coat the air in a sticky, ozone-sweet mist that dispersed the spores. The leader twisted violently, cryo-frost cracking under his augmented servos. With a roar, he shattered the sheath, shards exploding outward—one grazing Harlan’s arm, embedding deep enough to tear muscle and pin him back against a pillar with a thud that echoed like a drum. Harlan gasped, blood welling around the ice-dagger, his free hand fumbling for a med-patch. “Secure him!” Terry yelled, but the man was already bolting, pauldron sparking as he shouldered through the archway, vanishing into the gloom. Distant clangs marked his path—traps triggering, perhaps, or his accomplices. The group charged after, the tunnel narrowing into a vein-riddled maze. Walls wept black ichor, the substance hardening into jagged protrusions that scraped clothing and skin alike. The air grew thick, humid with the scent of burnt sugar and decay, gravity feeling heavier in the depths, as if the earth pressed down with spiteful weight. Echoes of howls filtered from the echo’s ripple—external forces, warped beasts from adjacent rifts, their cries a guttural chorus that vibrated through boot soles. Lirael leaned heavier on Terry, her steps faltering on an uneven slab, chest heaving with each exhale. “That insignia... your father? He can’t be part of this rot.” Her words carried a tactical bite, questioning not just the revelation but Terry’s resolve—could he weave through family shadows without fracturing? Terry’s reply came sharp, emitter probing

ahead for structural weaknesses. “He left the toolkit. If it’s tied to this, I end it.” Tension crackled between them; Elara shot him a glance, her bowstring taut in her grip, a silent urging for caution amid the charge. A trap sprung ahead—pressure plate underfoot, releasing a corruption geyser that erupted in a hissing plume, coating the leader’s silhouette in corrosive spray. He staggered, armor bubbling where the oil met seals, flesh beneath no doubt sloughing in raw strips. But he forged ahead, vanishing around a bend. They followed, dodging a hallucinatory mirage: the tunnel seeming to elongate into an endless void, walls closing in with illusory pressure that squeezed lungs. Elara grounded them, whispering sylvan chants that coaxed bioluminescent fungi from cracks—soft blue glows piercing the deception, revealing solid footing slick with slime. Mutations stirred in alcoves: a cluster of vermin, once rats, now bloated with crystalline spines, their fur matted in oily sheens. They skittered forward, spines launching like barbs—one embedding in Elara’s thigh with a wet thunk, the impact jolting her leg numb, poison racing up nerves in a fiery crawl that buckled her knee. She snarled, wrenching it free, blood trickling as she brewed a hasty antidote from a pouch—herbal steam rising to neutralize the burn, leaving her limp but mobile. Terry fired a kinetic pulse, the shield wave slamming the swarm against walls, spines shattering into powder that dusted the air like ash. Lirael contributed a wind shear, blades of air slicing through the mass, fur and crystal exploding in wet bursts that painted the tunnel red-black. Deeper in, the vein widened into a sub-chamber, collapsed beams forming a barricade. The leader perched atop, core device pulsing in his grasp—a rift anchor, feeding the echo. “You want the truth, Prince? Your father’s vein map leads to the heart. Join or die in the flood.” Betrayal’s weight bore down heavier than the tunnel’s crush. Terry raised his emitter, but Harlan’s squad caught up, one tossing a grapple line that snagged the leader’s boot, yanking him down in a tangle of limbs. The core skittered free, rolling toward a fissure where the multiversal distortion widened, pulling at edges with a vacuum whine. External howls swelled louder—shadows flickering at the fissure’s rim, claws scraping reality’s threshold. Elara nocked an arrow, Lirael steadied her staff with a grimace, and Terry overclocked his console, plasma coils glowing. Harlan, arm bandaged but functional, nodded

grimly. The alliance held, brittle as ice. As the first corrupted claw pierced through, Terry lunged for the core, fingers closing around its humming shell.

The core buzzed in Terry's grip, its shell vibrating like a trapped hornet, sending jolts up his arm that made his teeth ache. He yanked it back from the fissure's edge, the vacuum whine cutting off as the device powered down with a sputter of sparks. But the leader—masked face twisting in fury—rolled to his feet, boot free of the grapple, and bolted into a side passage. Harlan barked orders to his squad, two armored figures scrambling after him, their boots thudding echoes off the slime-slick walls. "After him!" Terry snarled, pocketing the core before it could reignite the tear. His console beeped a warning—residual rift energy spiking, ready to birth more abominations. Elara limped forward, thigh wound staunched but her gait uneven, arrow already nocked. Lirael leaned on her staff, sparks flickering from its tip as she fought the electrocution's aftershocks, muscles twitching like frayed wires. The tunnel narrowed ahead, corruption veins pulsing along the ceiling like infected arteries, dripping oily residue that hissed on contact with the floor. Terry surveyed his emitter's readout: structural integrity at 42%, collapses imminent. Flee straight and risk a cave-in, or veer into a maintenance duct to the right—tighter, but maybe stable. He chose the duct, ducking low as the group piled in, the space forcing them single-file. Lirael's elbow clipped a protruding pipe, dislodging a chunk of corroded metal that clanged down the shaft, alerting whatever lurked below. A trap triggered first—floor grates buckling under Elara's weight, releasing a burst of pressurized gas laced with corruption crystals. Shards peppered the air, one grazing Terry's shoulder, embedding shallow and burning like acid. He clamped a hand over it, blood welling hot, while firing a plasma lance to melt the grate shut. The gas clawed at their lungs, carrying whispers of conspiracy: fragmented audio logs from hidden speakers, crackling like old vids. "...Prince's research... weaponize the corruption... veins map the Sundering's core... turn soldiers into legions..." Terry's jaw clenched; his father's old notes, twisted into this nightmare. They burst into a wider vein, the air thickening with hallucinatory swarms—motes of corruption condensing into buzzing clouds that assaulted the senses. Terry's

vision warped: Elara's form bloating into a Vespari horror, her skin hardening to chitinous armor under a shroud of green fog, insectile limbs scuttling from viscous bogs that replaced the stone floor. He smelled acrid chemicals burning his nostrils, heard the squelch of acidic pools bubbling nearby. His stomach heaved, knees threatening to buckle from the nausea that pinned him like invisible weights. Dodge left into the illusion's "bog" and sink, or blast through? He opted for a kinetic shield, the energy dome flaring blue to shove the swarm back, shattering the visions into dissipating sparks. Real ground reappeared—jagged rocks slick with actual slime. Elara shook off her own torment, eyes watering from phantom spore clouds that made her see phantom hives pulsing with bioluminescent fungi, releasing waves of hallucinatory threats that clawed at her skin like invisible barbs. She loosed an arrow into the cloud's heart, the enchanted tip blooming vines that snared and crushed the motes, their oily bursts splattering her bracers. Lirael conjured a gale, wind whipping the swarm into a maelstrom that slammed it against the walls, crystals fracturing with pops that echoed like gunfire. But the effort drained her; she staggered, staff scraping stone as a fresh tremor shook the tunnel, ceiling chunks plummeting in a cascade of dust and debris. "Move!" Harlan bellowed from behind, his squad hauling a portable barrier to block a pursuing mutation—a hulking drone fused with corruption, its chassis sprouting fleshy tendrils that lashed out, coiling around one soldier's leg and yanking him into the dark. Screams cut short in a wet crunch. The group sprinted, Terry's boots slipping on the debris, each step a calculation: leap the fissure widening mid-floor, or bridge it with a plasma weld? He welded, the superheated beam fusing edges in a molten seam, steam hissing up to scald his face. Lirael crossed next, her wind boost propelling her over, but Elara's limp slowed her—tendrils from the drone breached the barrier, one whipping toward her ankle. She twisted mid-stride, firing a point-blank arrow that pierced the tendril, venomous sap erupting to corrode it back. Harlan's remaining squad—three now, faces grim under visors—covered their flank, plasma rifles chattering bursts that vaporized the drone's advance, leaving craters smoking in the walls. The leader's trail led upward, a service ladder rusted but intact, vanishing into a hidden chamber above. They climbed, rungs groaning under weight, corruption seeping from joints to

make handholds treacherous—slimy, crystallizing mid-grasp into needle-sharp grips that drew blood from Terry's palms. At the top, the chamber unfolded: a forgotten ritual vault, walls etched with pre-Sundering runes now cracked and weeping black ichor. The leader knelt at its center, armored hands tracing a circle around a pulsating altar, the air buzzing with charged particles, static prickling his skin with invoked energy. Chants echoed from his helmet's modulator, pulling at the veil—reality fraying at the edges, a titanic shape coalescing from the distortion. Harlan's squad burst in firing, bolts ricocheting off the leader's pauldrons, but he ignored them, slamming a crystal focus into the altar. The ground buckled as the rift guardian awakened: a titanic behemoth of warped stone and shadow, its form emerging like a mountain birthing from the floor—jagged limbs uncoiling, maw yawning wide with teeth of petrified corruption, bioluminescent slime dripping from crevices to sizzle on the stone. The beast roared, the sound a physical battering ram that hurled Harlan against a pillar, cracking his ribs with the impact. Its tail—a colossal whip of crystalline spines—swept low, shattering the altar's edge and sending shrapnel flying. Terry dove behind a toppled statue, console sparking as he analyzed: target the slime vents to destabilize the core, or shield the group first? Peril exposure to buy time. He deployed a kinetic dome, the shield absorbing a claw strike that dented it inward, pressure waves jolting his bones. Elara rolled clear, nocking a barrage of arrows laced with herbal corrosives, loosing them into the guardian's underbelly—tips burrowing, vines erupting to tear at flesh-stone, green sap mixing with black ooze in steaming rivulets. Lirael, teeth gritted against her lingering shocks, channeled a lightning torrent from her staff, bolts arcing to strike the beast's spines, shattering them in explosive bursts that rained debris. But the guardian lunged, a enormous paw slamming down, cratering the floor and forcing the alliance tighter—Harlan's squad forming a firing line, their rifles carving molten furrows across its hide, while Terry overclocked his emitter. Plasma lances speared the maw, superheating the slime to boil and burst, geysers of vapor scalding the air. In the chaos, the leader lunged for Terry, visor cracking under a stray wind shear from Lirael. "Your father didn't die in the Sundering—he built this! The vein maps were his gift to us, Prince. Weaponize the corruption, or watch it

consume everything." The words hit like a gut punch, but Terry parried with a shield bash, console interface flickering—old files syncing from the core in his pocket, confirming the betrayal: paternal blueprints fueling the conspiracy, Harlan's own logs implicating academy elders as co-conspirators. Rage fueled Terry's next weave: he funneled mana through runic code, converting it to an energy grid that wrapped the guardian's limbs, contracting with crackling force. Elara's vines anchored the grid, Lirael's storm amplifying the charge—lightning dancing along the weave, electrocuting the beast from within. It thrashed, spines embedding in walls, tearing chunks free in avalanches of stone. Harlan emptied a clip into its eye, the orb exploding in a spray of viscous fluid that corroded his armor. The guardian collapsed with a seismic groan, its body dissolving into corruption pools that bubbled and evaporated, leaving scorched craters and twisted metal. But victory shattered—the defeat ripped open a multiversal echo, a resonant pulse that warped the chamber's far wall into a shimmering portal. Howls echoed from beyond, not Earth's shadows but alien hungers: claws from Toxara's fog-shrouded swamps, Vespari swarms chitin-clicking at the threshold, drawn by the beacon. Terry's console blared alarms, the academy's outer defenses lighting up on his display—external forces converging, siege imminent. Elara notched another arrow, aiming at the growing tear. Lirael steadied her stance, winds gathering. Harlan reloaded, eyes on Terry. The leader, pinned under rubble, laughed through bloodied lips. Terry clenched the core tighter, plasma coils reigniting in his free hand. They braced as the first alien claw breached, scraping sparks across the floor.

The claw gouged deeper, a serrated talon from some fog-veiled swamp beast, its surface slick with bioluminescent slime that hissed against the stone. Sparks flew in erratic bursts, illuminating the chamber's jagged fissures. Terry's pulse buzzed in his ears, the core in his grip vibrating like a live wire. He thrust his palm forward, plasma coils igniting with a sharp whine. A bolt pierced out, slamming into the appendage and vaporizing a chunk—flesh sizzling, acrid steam curling up to sting his eyes. Elara loosed her arrow in the same breath, the shaft whistling through the haze. It embedded in the claw's joint with a wet crunch, enchanted vines erupting from the tip to coil and squeeze, wrenching the

limb back through the tear. “Hold the line!” she barked, her voice slicing through the breach’s low hum, fingers already drawing another from her quiver, knuckles blanching against the fletching. Lirael staggered forward, her side bandaged but seeping crimson through the hasty wrap. She raised both hands, conjuring a gale that howled into the breach, whipping the emerging tendrils aside like reeds in a storm. The wind carried the reek of brackish decay, mingled with the chamber’s ozone tang. “We seal it now, or we’re swarmed,” she grated, her breath ragged, one arm cradling her ribs where the guardian’s spine had glanced her earlier—each inhale a sharp stab that made her vision blur. Harlan pivoted, his squad fanning out behind him, rifles trained on the warp. “Cover the flanks! Prince, your toy better sync with our grid.” His voice sharpened with accusation and urgency, gloved hand slapping a fresh magazine home. The leader’s laughter rasped from the rubble, muffled but mocking, until Elara silenced him with a boot to the helm, grinding it into the debris. Terry ignored the jab, his console projecting a holographic overlay—runes flickering as he patched into the academy’s failing nexus. The breach pulsed wider, edges fraying like torn fabric, and through it glimpsed not just Toxara’s miasma but drifting silhouettes: porous islands suspended in misty void, nebular clouds shedding mineral rain that pattered against an invisible barrier. Nebula Drift. The name flashed in his interface, cross-referenced from forbidden archives. Alien winds tugged at the air, pulling dust motes into a maelstrom. A new threat slithered through—iridescent flecks swarming like embers in a breeze. They coalesced mid-air, wings buzzing into a humanoid haze, compound eyes merging into a glittering mosaic that fixed on the group. Symbiont Swarmfly. The console’s alert blared in his mind: parasitic cluster, adaptive infestation. One drone from Harlan’s line fired prematurely, bullets shredding the form into scattering insects. But they reformed faster, diving toward the soldier. He swung his rifle like a club, crushing a dozen against his pauldron, but others burrowed into the seams of his armor. The man howled, convulsing as the swarm siphoned, his veins bulging black beneath the plates. “Infestation protocol!” Harlan bellowed, yanking his comrade back. He triggered a flare from his belt, ultraviolet burst scattering the flies in a sizzling cloud. The air filled with their angry drone, a vibration that set teeth on edge. Terry wove a ki-

netic barrier, energy shield snapping into place like a translucent wall, repelling the dispersed swarm. The impact jolted his arms, feedback buzzing up his nerves. “Elara, bind the edges—Lirael, disrupt the flow!” He funneled mana through his core, converting it to a pulsing EMP wave. The grid buzzed, then discharged, rippling across the breach. Sparks erupted along the tear’s rim, sealing micro-fractures with fused glass, but the core overheated in his palm, scorching his skin raw—blisters rising instantly and angry. Elara knelt, slamming her palms to the floor. Roots burst from cracks in the stone, thorned tendrils snaking toward the breach. They latched onto the warping wall, thickening into cables that strained against the pull. One vine snapped back, lashing her cheek and drawing a thin line of blood that welled hot. She hissed but held, sweat beading on her brow, muscles corded under her tunic. Lirael channeled her stormweave, fingers clawing the air as if gripping reins. Bolts forked from her nails, arcing into the breach’s heart. The electric barrage crackled, ionizing the incoming mists and forcing back a probing claw from Toxara— the limb charred mid-extension, withdrawing with a guttural screech that echoed like tearing metal. But the effort buckled her knees; she dropped to one knee, the wind dying to a whimper, her free hand pressing her side where pain lanced deeper, breath coming in wheezes that tasted of copper. The breach stabilized fractionally, its shimmer dulling, but the howls intensified—Vespari chitin clacking louder, swamp beasts bellowing in rhythmic hunger. Harlan’s squad poured fire into the gap, plasma rounds from their hybrids melting the threshold, but each shot widened secondary rifts in the chamber walls. Stone groaned, a ceiling beam plummeting to smash a console, shards peppering Terry’s legs with stinging grazes. “Vein maps... your father’s legacy,” the leader wheezed from his pin, voice bubbling with phlegm. “He saw the power—corruption as evolution, not curse. The elders buried it, but we dig it up.” Terry’s jaw clenched, a vein pulsing at his temple. He kicked rubble onto the man’s chest, eliciting a grunt, but the words burrowed like the swarmflies, syncing with the files in his pocket: blueprints stamped with his father’s sigil, diagrams of corruption veins laced through Earth’s crust, weaponized for multiversal dominance. Harlan glanced at him, rifle dipping a fraction. “Truth in that venom? Your blood tied to this mess?” The question hung, tactical and probing for

fracture in the alliance. Terry met his gaze, emitter buzzing hotter. “Leverage it later. Focus fire—my weave’s holding, but we need to collapse the echo.” He overclocked the core again, ignoring the burn creeping up his wrist. The energy grid expanded, wrapping the breach like a noose, contracting with a whine that built to a screech. Elara’s vines creaked under strain, one tendril shearing off as a Vespari pincer thrust through— the appendage scything air inches from her shoulder, clipping a lock of hair that floated down singed. She rolled aside, loosing an arrow that pinned the limb, venom bubbling on the tip to corrode the chitin with foaming acid. The smell hit like vinegar and rot, turning her stomach. Liraelrose shakily, conjuring a localized squall that hurled debris into the tear—chunks of warped metal battering the emerging forms, crunching exoskeletons with dull thuds. A swarmfly cluster veered toward her, but she blasted it with a palm-thrust gust, insects pulping against the wall in a smear of iridescence. The backlash wind tore at her bandages, fresh blood soaking through, and she bit back a cry, tasting salt on her lips. Harlan’s team advanced, boots crunching over dissolved guardian remnants— the pools still bubbling, sending up wisps that corroded boot soles with faint sizzles. One soldier slipped, ankle twisting in the slick, and a tendril from the breach snagged his leg, yanking him toward the tear. Harlan grabbed his harness, hauling back with a bellow, veins standing out on his neck. “Pull him free—now!” Terry diverted power, a plasma arc slicing the tendril clean. It retracted in a spray of ichor that splattered the soldier’s visor, etching pits into the glass. The man gasped, coughing as the residue burned his exposed neck, skin reddening in blistering welts. The grid tightened, the breach warping inward with a thunderous crack. Nebular mists recoiled, islands’ shadows fading from view. But resistance mounted—a titanic shape loomed beyond, not fully crossing but pressing, its weight distorting the air like heat haze. Claws raked the barrier, scoring furrows that sparked and smoked. Elara notched her final arrow, breath steady despite the gash on her cheek. “It’s anchoring—hit the core nexus!” Lirael nodded, winds funneling into a spear of compressed air, her face pale but set. Harlan barked orders, his squad unleashing a volley that lit the chamber in staccato flashes. Terry poured everything into the weave, mana surging through circuits until his vision tunneled. The core glowed white-hot,

the contraction peaking— the breach imploded with a sonic boom, slamming shut in a maelstrom of compressed forces. The backlash hurled everyone back: Terry skidded across the floor, shoulder cracking against a pillar with a jolt that numbed his arm; Elara tumbled into a wall, elbow hyperextending with a pop that drew a sharp inhale; Lirael fetched up against Harlan, who caught her but staggered, knee buckling under the shared weight. Silence crashed in, broken only by settling dust and distant tremors. The chamber's walls stabilized, rifts sealing with residual crackles. But alarms wailed anew from Terry's console— outer perimeters breached, not by the echo's pull, but coordinated strikes. Shadows moved in the corridors beyond: armored figures, rift implants pulsing on their forms. Harlan helped Lirael up, her hand trembling in his. "Siege is here. Your call, Prince." Terry rose, core cooling in his blistered fist, emitter reigniting with a defiant spark. The leader's eyes gleamed from the rubble, unbowed. Elara surveyed the sealed wall, arrow ready. Then the floor buckled beneath them, a deeper corruption vein surfacing—black ooze seeping upward, crystallizing into spikes that pierced the air with hungry barbs.

Chapter 3: Echoes of the Sundering

The academy's foundations groaned like a beast in its death throes, the floor bucking beneath Terry's boots as fresh veins of corruption erupted from the cracked stone. Oily black ichor sprayed upward in jagged arcs, splattering the walls and hissing where it met the air, releasing that acrid tang of ozone laced with charred caramel. Terry gripped his wrist gauntlet tighter, its runes flickering blue as he probed the tunnel ahead—narrow, vein-riddled passages snaking into the underbelly, lit only by the pulsating glow of the corruption. "Stay low," he barked to Elara and Lirael, his voice slicing through the rumble. Lirael leaned on Elara's shoulder, her face pale and slick with sweat from the earlier electrocution, but her eyes burned with defiance. She nodded once, flexing her fingers around her stormstaff, sparks dancing along its length despite the tremor in her grip. Instructor Harlan's squad emerged from a side vent, five figures in reinforced hazard suits, their plasma rifles buzzing at the ready. Harlan

himself, a grizzled veteran with a scarred jaw and a mechanical eye that whirred as it focused on Terry, clapped a gauntleted hand on the prodigy's shoulder. "Prince. Good—you're in one piece. We've got reports of ritual activity below. Corruption's spreading faster than a plasma leak." Terry shrugged off the touch, the corner of his mouth twitching in a tight smirk. "Then let's plug it. My weave can stabilize those veins before they turn this place into a slag heap." He jabbed a thumb toward the main passage, assessing tactics: charge straight into the heart of the instability, where the corruption throbbed strongest, or skirt the edges via the service ducts, risking cave-in but dodging the worst of the spray. Elara's vines uncoiled from her bracers, probing the floor ahead like living sensors. They retracted with a snap, coated in glistening black. "Straight on's suicide," she murmured, her brow furrowing as she glanced at Lirael's labored breaths. "Ducts might give us cover, but the corruption's already gnawing through the supports." She chose for them, veering left into a narrower chute, her body language pulling the group along—practical, unyielding. They descended into the underbelly, the air thickening to a humid fog that clung to their skin like wet silk. The walls wept oily residue, and every step echoed with a wet squelch. Harlan's squad fanned out, rifles sweeping the gloom, while Terry calibrated his gauntlet, converting ambient mana into a low-yield energy shield that glowed around the group like a translucent bubble, deflecting stray droplets of corruption. Then the visions struck—not as whispers or dreams, but as brutal sensory onslaughts that clawed at their senses. The tunnel warped, the air rippling with heat haze that carried the roar of ancient winds and the crack of splitting earth. Terry staggered, his vision blurring as phantom flames licked at his peripheral sight, the heat searing his cheeks like an open forge. He smelled smoke, thick and choking, though no fire burned; it filled his lungs, making him cough and double over, one hand scraping the wall for balance while the other raised his gauntlet to fire a stabilizing pulse into the air. Elara dropped to a knee, her vines whipping wildly as she saw the stone floor ripple into a sea of writhing shadows—illusory roots that snagged at her ankles, yanking with phantom force that bruised her skin. She snarled, channeling her magic into a burst of thorns that shredded the hallucination, the real wall splintering under the impact. "It's the

echoes," she gasped, hauling Lirael upright. "Sundering's ghosts, feeding on the corruption." Lirael retched, a wave of vertigo slamming her like a gut punch; the tunnel spun, colors inverting to sickly greens and blacks, and a phantom gale howled in her ears, whipping her hair and stinging her eyes with grit that wasn't there. She gripped her staff, summoning a localized gust to steady herself, the wind scattering the illusion but leaving her knees watery. Harlan bellowed orders, his squad unleashing suppressive fire—plasma bolts sizzling through the haze, carving glowing scars into the walls that revealed fleeting glimpses: spectral warriors from the old cataclysm, their forms translucent yet solid enough to block paths. One echo, a hulking figure in rusted armor, swung an enormous hammer that connected with a squad member's shield, the impact jarring the man back with a bone-rattling thud, vibrations traveling up his arms. Terry's thoughts whirled through tactics: flank the echoes with plasma lances to disrupt their cohesion, or overload the vein with a conversion burst to ground the visions? The peril of the latter—a feedback surge that could fry his gauntlet—held him back, his fingers hovering over the activation rune. But the pressing goal burned clear: clear the path to the ritual site, or the corruption would metastasize unchecked. He opted for precision, thrusting his arm forward. A lance of superheated plasma erupted from his gauntlet, white-hot and crackling, piercing the nearest echo. The warrior's form destabilized in a shower of ethereal shards, the air cooling as the illusion fractured, but the effort left Terry's arm numb, muscles twitching from the recoil. The group forged ahead, battling through the storm of senses. Elara's arrows, tipped with herbal corrosives, pierced another echo's chest, the figure dissolving in a sizzle of acrid vapor that burned their nostrils. Lirael, fighting nausea that cramped her stomach, unleashed a torrent of lightning from her staff, the bolts arcing blue-white and grounding into the floor, shattering a cluster of visions with explosive pops that showered sparks. Farther below, the underbelly opened into a cavernous chamber, its ceiling a lattice of exposed roots and pipes now veined with pulsing black. At the center loomed the ritual site: a circular altar of warped stone, etched with glowing runes that funneled corruption upward in spiraling tendrils, amplifying the spread. The armored leader stood there, cloaked in shadows, his helmet's visor gleaming as

he chanted—inaudible words that vibrated the air like a tuning fork. Harlan's squad opened fire, bolts ricocheting off the leader's energy barriers with metallic pings. Terry surveyed the setup: disrupt the runes directly with a targeted EMP, or sever the veins feeding the altar? The EMP risked shorting the chamber's supports, dooming them all, so he chose the veins, signaling Elara with a sharp gesture. She responded instantly, her vines lancing out like spears, wrapping the black tendrils and squeezing until they burst in sprays of viscous fluid that sizzled on the ground. Lirael followed with a shockwave of wind, the gust howling through the chamber and toppling rune-stones, cracks spiderwebbing the altar. The leader whirled, firing a barrage of rift-shards—jagged crystals that whistled through the air. One grazed Harlan's shoulder, embedding and pulsing, drawing a grunt as corruption seeped into his suit. Terry countered with a kinetic shield expansion, the barrier flaring to absorb the volley, the impacts blooming like fireworks against the energy field, heat bleeding through to singe his palms. But the leader was already moving, slamming a device onto the altar—a multiversal beacon that ignited in a maelstrom of swirling colors, the air warping with a thunderclap that shook loose boulders from the ceiling. Reinforcements tore through the veil: hulking silhouettes of otherworldly beasts, their forms coalescing from the rift with roars that rattled their teeth. "Fall back!" Harlan bellowed, dragging his wounded squad member as the chamber trembled anew. External alarms blared through the comms—siege forces breaching the outer wards, the academy's barriers shattering under coordinated assault. Terry's jaw clenched, his eyes locking on a side passage leading upward. No time for pursuit; fortify the central nexus or lose everything. They bolted, Elara supporting Lirael as vines cleared debris from their path. Terry led, gauntlet buzzing, blasting a collapsing archway to buy seconds. In the nexus antechamber, they skidded to a halt before a holographic dais, its surface flickering to life unbidden. Words materialized in glowing script, a prophecy etched in ancient runes: *The son's weave shall bind the vein, or the Sundering's child shall devour the worlds anew. The architect's shadow lingers, key to the second fracture.* Terry froze, the text searing into his retinas—his father, the hidden architect? Harlan cursed, priming his rifle, but Terry's hand shot out, fingers tracing the hologram's edge, pulling data

streams into his gauntlet for analysis. Elara yanked him back as a fresh vein erupted nearby, black ichor fountaining toward them. She hurled a barrage of thorn-seeds that rooted in the flow, constricting it with fibrous growth, the corruption hissing in protest. Lirael, chest heaving, raised her staff, summoning a barrier of swirling gales to hold the spray at bay. Terry integrated the prophecy's runes into his weave, the gauntlet sparking as it interfaced. Harlan's squad formed a defensive perimeter, rifles trained on the tunnel mouth where the beacon's summons echoed closer—clawed feet scraping stone, growls building to a frenzy. With a final calibration twist, Terry unleashed the fortified weave, energy lancing into the nexus core, sealing the pressing breach in a cascade of stabilizing light. But the external breaches hammered on, vibrations shaking the dais, and the armored leader's laughter reverberated faintly from the depths. Elara notched an arrow, her stance widening as the first rift-beast lunged into view—a twisted fusion of fur and crystal, jaws unhinging with a wet snap.

Elara's arrow whistled through the air, its tip blooming into a cluster of razor-edged petals that embedded in the brute's crystalline flank with a crystalline crunch. Black ichor sprayed, sizzling against the stone floor and filling the antechamber with the acrid tang of ozone laced with something sweeter, like charred caramel. The brute staggered, its furred bulk—matted and fused with jagged quartz growths—twisting mid-lunge, but it didn't drop. Instead, it whipped its head, jaws clamping shut inches from Harlan's boot, the snap echoing like fracturing ice. Terry pivoted, gauntlet buzzing as he gauged the approaches: the brute blocked the main exit, but a side vent gaped to his left, too narrow for the thing's bulk yet wide enough for a flank. Perilous—squeeze through and risk getting pinned if more poured in—but holding the center meant facing the horde head-on, with Lirael's barrier already flickering under the strain. He chose the flank, boots scraping as he darted left, plasma coils charging with a low whine. A lance of superheated blue fire erupted from his palm, searing into the brute's underbelly where fur met crystal. Flesh bubbled and popped, the stench thickening to a choking haze, but the brute bellowed—a guttural roar that vibrated the walls—and swiped a paw tipped with obsidian claws, gouging furrows in the dais. Harlan's squad opened fire, rifle bursts

stitching crimson lines across the brute's hide, metal-jacketed rounds ricocheting off crystals in sparks that lit the dim chamber like errant fireworks. One soldier grunted, clutching a gash on his arm where the swipe had clipped him, blood mixing with the oily corruption on the floor. "Flank it!" Harlan barked, his voice gravel over the din, rifle bucking as he poured lead into the brute's eyes. Bullets cratered the bulging orbs, vitreous fluid oozing, but the thing pressed forward, driven by that primal rift-fury. Lirael leaned on her staff, face pale and slick with sweat, her free hand clenching the wood until her knuckles blanching. The electrocution's aftershocks still trembled through her limbs—she could feel the static prickling her skin, urging her to collapse—but dropping now meant the barrier failed, and that ichor fountain would drown them. She thrust her staff forward, conjuring a gale that hurled the brute sideways, its bulk slamming into a support pillar with a thunderous crack. Dust sifted from the ceiling, gritty particles stinging their eyes, as the brute shook itself, crystals grinding like teeth. Elara loosed another arrow, this one trailing a vine that lashed out mid-flight, wrapping the brute's foreleg and yanking it off-balance. The corded growth creaked under the strain, thorns drawing beads of corrosive sap that dripped and etched pits in the stone. "It's conjuring projections!" she called, gaze sharpening at the air rippling behind the brute—faint outlines flickering into view, translucent figures in archaic armor, wielding blades that hummed with forgotten weaves. The visions coalesced not as ghosts, but as rift-spawned projections, physical enough to cast shadows and stir the air with their phantom steps. One materialized as a towering warrior, helm scarred by what looked like claw marks, swinging an enormous hammer that whooshed through the space where Terry had stood a heartbeat before. The impact cratered the floor, sending shards of tile skittering like shrapnel. Terry rolled aside, pulse thundering a metallic rhythm in his chest, tasting copper on his tongue. These weren't illusions—they struck like flesh and bone, projections pulled from the Sundering's fractured timeline, their forms rippling with the same oily corruption. "Disrupt the nexus feed!" Terry bellowed, fingers flying over his gauntlet. He probed: the dais's hologram still pulsed, runes feeding energy to the visions, amplifying the corruption's grip. But severing it risked destabilizing the seal they'd just woven—cracks already

spiderwebbing the core's light. He fired a kinetic pulse instead, a shimmering shield snapping up to deflect the hammer's next swing, the force jarring his arm to the shoulder. The projection warrior recoiled, its form glitching, revealing flashes within: a cataclysm of shattering skies, continents buckling under waves of black ichor, and a figure at the epicenter—cloaked, manipulating threads of aether that birthed the rifts. Terry's breath caught; that silhouette, the way it wove... it matched holos of his father, the architect who'd vanished into legend, not myth, but conspiracy. Another projection lunged at Elara—a lithe scout with dual blades, her translucent form blurring as she slashed. Elara ducked, the edge whistling past her ear, close enough to ruffle her hair. She countered with a low sweep of her bow, the wood cracking against the projection's knee with a resonant thud that dispersed its leg into mist. But the hit cost her; the brute, freed from the vine by its thrashing, barreled toward her, jaws wide. Harlan intercepted, slamming his rifle butt into its snout—bone cracked, but the brute's momentum bowled him over, claws raking his chest plate in screeching furrows. Lirael seized the opening, her staff whipping up a maelstrom that scooped debris—shards of crystal, spent casings—into a stinging barrage. The maelstrom howled, whipping her hair into a frenzy and drawing the metallic tang of blood from a reopened cut on her lip. It engulfed the brute, grinding its fur to tatters and shattering crystals into glittering dust that pattered like hail. The brute howled, collapsing in a twitching heap, but the projections multiplied—three more warriors flickering into solidity, their weapons gleaming with rift-corroded edges. Terry's thoughts whirled through options: the side vent still yawned, a potential escape to the underbelly tunnels, but abandoning the dais meant the visions spread unchecked, and those external breaches hammered closer, the ground quaking with each impact. No—push through, target the ritual anchor. He spotted it: a pulsating node in the dais's base, veined with corruption, feeding the projections. "Cover me!" He lunged forward, plasma piercing out to vaporize one projection's blade mid-swing, the superheated burst melting alloy into slag that dripped in glowing rivulets. Elara nodded, her fingers blurring as she nocked and fired in rapid succession—arrows sprouting entangling roots that snared two projections, the fibrous coils tightening with audible

snaps, crushing translucent armor until the forms shattered into harmless wisps. But the third projection—a burly berserker with axes—broke free, charging Lirael. She parried with a gale-shield, wind buffeting the axes aside, but the effort buckled her knees, staff trembling in her grip. Sweat beaded on her brow, mixing with grit, as she gritted her teeth and unleashed a bolt of chain lightning that arced from her fingertips, forking into the projection's chest. The figure convulsed, electricity crackling along its form, before exploding in a shower of embers that singed the air. Harlan hauled himself up, chest heaving, blood seeping through his torn plate. His squad—down to three now, one nursing a shattered arm—formed a firing line, suppressing the brute's remnants as smaller mutations skittered from the shadows, insectile things with chitin fused to wire. Bullets chewed through them, exoskeletons bursting in wet pops, but the air thickened with delirious mirages—visions bleeding into reality, dunes of rust-red sand miraging across the floor, whispering winds carrying the gritty bite of metallic dust. Terry blinked hard, the illusion clawing at his focus; for a split second, he saw Nomari-like scavengers tunneling from the "sand," but it was corruption-trickery, projections of distant worlds pulled through the beacon. He reached the dais, gauntlet interfacing with the node. Data surged through his display—fragments of the Sundering: his father's weave, not stabilizing but experimenting, prying open rifts to harness the aether's power, only for it to backlash in continental fury. The architect's shadow, indeed—hiding blueprints for weaponizing the corruption, now in the leader's hands. Terry's jaw clenched, a muscle twitching at his temple, as he overrode the feed, plasma surging to cauterize the veins. The node erupted in a contained blast, heat washing over him like an open forge, scorching his sleeve. The projections winked out, the storm dissipating in a final gust that rattled loose panels. But triumph soured fast—a distant rumble swelled, the armored leader's voice crackling over stolen comms: "The beacon wakes. Come, children of the veil." Seismic tremors rocked the chamber, cracks widening in the walls as multiversal reinforcements clawed closer—hulking silhouettes pressing against the nexus seal. "No," Terry muttered, ripping his gauntlet free. The central nexus held, but barely; external siege forces breached fully now, the academy's wards crumpling like foil. Harlan gestured to a crumbling stairwell descending into

the underbelly. “Deeper—disrupt whatever ritual he’s priming down there.” Elara slung her bow, hoisting Lirael with a firm grip around the waist, while the squad reloaded, faces grim under flickering emergency lights. They charged into the stairwell, Terry blasting a falling slab aside with a kinetic shove that sent it tumbling into the abyss below. The air grew colder, heavier with the burnt-sugar reek, as projections of warriors faded behind them—but new ones stirred ahead, spectral clashes replaying the Sundering’s horrors along the walls. A titanic guardian abomination loomed in the gloom below: matted fur welded to rusted metal plates, eyes bulging with crystalline rims, bone spurs weeping acidic sap that pitted the steps. It reared, a bellow shaking the tunnel, forcing Terry to brace against the wall as the group charged down, weapons raised.

The guardian’s bellow warped the air, a guttural roar that vibrated through Terry’s boots and set his teeth on edge. Its titanic frame—fur matted with crystalline veins, metal plates groaning like rusted joints—slammed down on the steps, shattering stone into razor shards that peppered the squad like shrapnel. Harlan barked an order, his squad fanning out: two burly cadets with plasma rifles hunkered behind a jutting ledge, while a wiry techmage primed a drone swarm from her pack. Elara propped Lirael against the wall with a firm but urgent push, her vines already uncoiling from her gauntlets like living ropes. “Stay low—channel what you can,” she hissed, nocking an arrow tipped with glowing sap. Lirael nodded, pale and sweating, her fingers sparking erratically as she drew on residual storm energy, the air around her crackling with static. Terry’s gauntlet buzzed, projecting a kinetic barrier that shimmered blue and caught the worst of the debris. The abomination lunged, its bone spurs extending into whipping tendrils that gouged the wall inches from his shoulder, spraying acidic sap that sizzled on the metal walkway. Ozone bit his nostrils, mingling with the acrid tang of melting rock. He fired first—a lance of superheated plasma that pierced the beast’s flank, vaporizing fur and exposing a pulsating corruption core beneath. The guardian recoiled, its crystalline eyes flaring, but it countered with a swipe that buckled the barrier, forcing Terry to roll aside as the impact cratered the step. “Flank it!” Harlan bellowed, his own rifle spitting bolts that melted a spur clean off,

the severed limb twitching on the ground like a dying snake. The squad's drones buzzed forward, harrying the creature's joints with micro-explosions that popped like firecrackers, weakening the welds. Elara loosed her arrow, the shaft burrowing into the abomination's throat with a wet thunk. Corrosive sap bubbled from the wound, but the vines followed, snaking from the impact site to wrap its forelimbs, yanking them taut. The tree-like trunk of its torso heaved, branches—now metallic claws—raking the air. Lirael thrust her palms out, conjuring a gale that howled through the stairwell, slamming the guardian back a step and scattering its acidic drool across the walls, where it etched glowing runes of decay. The beast thrashed, uprooting a section of stair with its rear claws, the collapse sending the squad scrambling. Terry vaulted the gap, gauntlet interfacing mid-air to boost his jump with a repulsion pulse. He landed on its shoulder, driving a plasma blade into the crystalline rim of its eye. Sparks erupted, the orb shattering in a spray of oily shards that burned his skin like hot coals. The guardian bucked, hurling him toward the abyss, but Elara's vine lashed out, coiling his waist and yanking him back. They hit the ground together, rolling as the creature's tail—fused bone and chain—whipped overhead, embedding in the ceiling with a clang that rained dust. "Core—hit the core!" Terry gasped, tasting blood and grit. The squad closed in: rifles chattered, drones swarmed the exposed corruption core, and Lirael's lightning forked from her fingertips, arcing into the wound with a deafening crack. The guardian convulsed, its bellow turning to a gurgling wheeze as the core ruptured, spewing black ichor that steamed on the steps. It toppled sideways, crashing into the wall and blocking the path ahead, its body twitching in death throes. Harlan swiped sweat from his brow, his chest heaving. "Clear the debris. Underbelly's just below—ritual site's pulsing like a heartbeat." His eyes darted to Terry, suspicion clenching his jaw. "Those visions up top... your father's name in the feeds. Care to explain before we trust you with the nexus?" Terry's fingers flexed around his gauntlet, knuckles blanching. "Later. The leader's down there—weaponizing the corruption." He blasted a boulder aside with a kinetic shove, the rock exploding into fragments that skittered down the stairs. Elara helped Lirael stand, the herbalist's arm slung over her shoulder. "He's right. Projections are worsening—feel the pull?" The air grew

dense as they descended, the burnt-sugar stench thickening, now laced with the metallic tang of blood from spectral projections flickering along the walls. Ghostly warriors manifested: armored figures from the Sundering era, their blades clashing in silent fury against shadowy abominations. One phantom—a cloaked engineer with a familiar jawline—wove runes that backfired, rifts tearing open in holographic bursts, continents fracturing in miniature cataclysms. Lirael's breath caught, her free hand clutching Elara's sleeve. "That's... the architect. Prying the veil, not sealing it." Lightning danced at her fingertips, unbidden, as the visions pressed closer, their chill raising gooseflesh. The underbelly opened into a vast chamber, veins of corruption erupting from fissures like arterial sprays, coating the floor in shimmering oil that bubbled and hissed. Delirious mirages swirled: illusions of sand-scoured wastelands where scavenger hordes burrowed from the ground, their claws reaching for the squad. Terry shook his head, the visions clawing at his peripherals—Nomari-like figures with elongated limbs—but he grounded himself, gauntlet probing for real threats. "Projections," he snapped, firing a plasma grid that dispersed a cluster, the illusions shattering like glass, leaving lingering screams. The squad forged through, rifles sweeping, as the mirages raged, whipping up debris that pelted their armor. Ahead, the ritual site loomed: a circle of etched nodes pulsing with purple ooze, centered by a titanic corrupted oak. Its bark split wide, revealing throbbing filaments that fed on ensnared wildlife—skeletal birds and rodents dragged into the trunk, dissolving with wet pops that made the wood swell grotesquely. Branches contorted into thorned claws, weeping sap that pooled and corroded the stone. The armored leader stood at the circle's edge, gauntlets interfacing with a central obelisk. "Too late, Prince," he sneered, voice modulated through his helm. "The beacon calls kin from the veil—your father's legacy, perfected." Harlan's squad unleashed fire, bolts scorching the air, but the oak lashed out, branches ensnaring a cadet and yanking him into the trunk with a muffled cry. His form melted into sludge, the tree bloating further. Elara countered, her arrows piercing limbs, vines exploding from the wounds to bind them back. "Disrupt the circle—now!" Terry charged, dodging a thorn swipe that gouged his pauldron, the impact jarring his arm. He slammed his gauntlet into a node, data

surging through his display: blueprints of corruption amplifiers, signatures matching his father's hidden archives. The leader's doing—twisting the Sundering's backlash into a weapon. Jaw clenched, Terry overrode the flow, plasma surging to fry the conduits. Nodes sparked, the circle splintering with seismic tremors. Liraël conjured a tempest, winds howling through the chamber, uprooting illusory scavengers and slamming the oak's branches against the walls, thorns snapping like brittle bone. The leader recoiled, activating the obelisk with a final pulse. A multiversal beacon ignited, reality rippling as reinforcements clawed through: towering silhouettes of otherworldly beasts, their forms pressing the veil thin. "You fool," the leader growled, lobbing a smoke grenade that obscured the air with choking haze. He vanished into a side tunnel, the oak's remnants thrashing wildly. External booms thundered—siege forces breaching the wards above, the academy trembling. "Nexus—fortify it!" Harlan bellowed, squad hauling the surviving cadet free from a vine snare. They bolted upward through collapsing passages, visions bombarding them: the architect—Terry's father—whispering prophecies in the projections. "The corruption returns threefold... only the weaver's blood seals the scar." Terry's stomach churned, but he blasted a falling beam aside, kinetic force crumpling it like tin. In the central nexus chamber, corruption veins snaked across the floor, the seal weakening. Elara and Liraël wove barriers—vines reinforcing crystal, storms crackling to repel the encroaching oil. Harlan's tech-mage interfaced auxiliary nodes, drones patching breaches. Terry reached the core console, fingers flying over runes. The prophecy hologram flickered to life: a second Sundering loomed unless the "prodigy's weave" bound the veins. His father's shadow, indeed—setting this trap generations ago. A breach tore open nearby, reinforcements spilling through: corrupted hounds with metal fangs, lunging with snarls that echoed the visions. The squad met them head-on—plasma melting hides, arrows pinning limbs, lightning forking to char fur. Terry sealed a vein with a plasma cauterization, the substance boiling away in a sizzle of steam, but more poured from cracks. Elara grunted, vine-whipping a hound into the wall, cratering stone. "Hold the line—they're tying the beacon to this!" Liraël's stormweave swelled, winds battering the beasts back, but her face blanched, exhaustion carving lines around her eyes. Harlan covered her,

rifle barking until the barrel glowed red. The leader's voice crackled again: "The veil thins. Join us, or perish in the projection." Terry overrode the final node, the nexus stabilizing in a surge of energy that lit the chamber blue. Reinforcements howled, retreating as the seal clamped shut, but tremors persisted—deeper threats stirring. He gripped the console edge, knuckles blanching, as the squad gulped air amid the wreckage, the prophecy's weight hanging like smoke. Elara's hand clamped his shoulder, firm, while Lirael leaned on her bow, sparks fading from her palms. Harlan glared at him, rifle lowered but ready. "Prophecy or not," the instructor said, voice low, "we end this now. Lead, Prince—or step aside."

Terry's jaw clenched, a muscle twitching under his skin as he met Harlan's glare. He shoved back from the console, the metal edge biting into his palms. "I'm leading," he snapped, voice edged like a rune-etched blade. "Follow or get trampled." He turned, boots scraping over cracked tiles veined with oily corruption, and jabbed a finger toward the chamber's far archway. "That ritual site's below—projections are funneling the corruption straight here. We cut it off at the root." Harlan's squad shifted, rifles buzzing to life with charged coils. The tech-mage, a wiry cadet named Kael with grease-streaked cheeks, nodded sharply, slinging his toolkit over one shoulder. "Prince's weave held the core—smart reroute. But those veins are pulsing faster; we hit the underbelly now or the nexus cracks wide." His fingers drummed the toolkit's latch, a staccato rhythm betraying his itch to rewire the chaos. Elara uncoiled a vine from her wrist bracer, the tendril thickening into a coiled lash that whipped the air with a crack. She glanced at Lirael, who was binding a gash on her arm with a strip of storm-silk, the fabric flickering with residual static. "Vines to bind the projections, storms to scatter them," Elara said, her voice sharp, emerald gaze sharpening at the archway's shadowed maw. "No splitting up—flank tight." Lirael rose, bow creaking as she nocked an arrow tipped with crackling quartz. Her chest heaved, but she rolled her shoulders, sparks dancing along her knuckles like fireflies in a gale. "Tight's good," she muttered, the corner of her mouth twitching in a grim half-smile. "Last time we spread, I ate lightning. Let's choke their ritual before it chokes us." The ground lurched—a

resounding groan from the academy's bones—as another corruption vein erupted nearby, spewing shards that skittered like black glass across the floor. Terry vaulted aside, plasma emitter buzzing in his grip. He fired a lance, the superheated bolt sizzling through the air to vaporize the growth in a burst of acrid steam. The squad charged into the archway, descending spiral stairs that plunged into the crumbling underbelly. Dust sifted from the ceiling, carrying the tang of ozone and charred earth. Walls wept oily rivulets, twisting metal supports into grotesque, corruption-laced spines. Deeper they went. The air grew dense, humid and heavy, pressing against their skin like a damp shroud. Projections stirred first as whispers—faint murmurs of ancient voices—then coalesced into spectral apparitions. A titanic figure manifested ahead: a warrior from the Sundering era, armored in rune-forged plate now pitted with corruption scars, swinging a hammer that trailed phantom shockwaves. The apparition lunged, not solid but slamming Terry with a gale-force buffet that hurled him against the wall, ribs bruising on stone. "Phased projections!" Harlan bellowed, raising his rifle. Bolts of ionized rounds streaked out, passing through the specter harmlessly but ionizing the air into a crackling haze that made the apparition flicker. Kael slammed a disruptor node onto the wall, its buzz vibrating through the floor. "Frequency lock—it's syncing to the corruption veins. Disrupt the ritual pulse, and they destabilize." Elara lashed out with her vine, the tendril elongating to snag the projection's hammer mid-swing. It wrapped tight, thorns piercing the apparition's ethereal form, drawing out wisps of corrupted aether that sizzled on contact. The warrior thundered—a sound like grinding tectonic plates—and shattered into motes that burned like embers on the squad's skin. She retracted the vine with a flick, wiping sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. "Bindings hold better than bullets here. Weave the roots to the veins—starve the projections." They forged ahead, the stairs widening into a cavernous sublevel where the academy's foundations met raw bedrock. Delirious mirages swirled in pockets: one cadet staggered, clutching his head as vivid scents bombarded him—burnt sugar flooding his nostrils, forcing him to his knees in a retch. Invisible needles pricked his scalp, drawing beads of blood that welled without wounds. Lirael conjured a gale, her stormweave ripping through the air in a maelstrom that shredded

the illusion, scattering it like torn fog. The cadet gasped, flush returning to his face as the pain ebbed. “Storms clear the haze,” Lirael said through gritted teeth, her free hand steadying the man. “But they’re drawing from the ritual—feel that pull?” She jerked her chin toward a glowing circle etched into the floor ahead, ringed by pulsating corruption veins that fed a central obelisk. Holographic fragments danced above it: glimpses of the Sundering—continents fracturing in slow, agonizing breaches, the architect (Terry’s father) silhouetted against the chaos, his hands weaving barriers that cracked under the strain. Terry’s emitter whirred as he charged it, gaze fixed on the apparitions. The architect’s voice reverberated, fragmented: “...the scar bleeds eternal... blood of the weaver to mend...” A chill knifed his gut, but he channeled it into focus, firing a plasma grid that arced toward the obelisk. The energy lattice slammed into the stone, melting runes into slag, but the leader’s armored form burst from the shadows—cloaked in breach-forged plating that absorbed the blast with a hungry slurp. “You meddle in legacies,” the leader rasped, voice modulated through a grille scarred by corruption. He hurled a gauntlet forward, unleashing a swarm of hallucinatory insects—manifest as chitinous horrors that buzzed with real wings, their stings injecting waves of nausea that buckled knees and blurred vision. One latched onto Harlan’s arm, burrowing with a sizzle; he bellowed, smashing it against the wall in a spray of ichor. Squad rifles crackled, rounds punching craters into the leader’s armor, but he twisted away, activating a beacon at the obelisk’s base. It flared, a multiversal breach yawning open—pulling in air with a maelstrom howl, summoning reinforcements: towering silhouettes from beyond, their forms twisting as they solidified into corruption-warped brutes with limbs of fused metal and flesh. “Disrupt it!” Terry bellowed, lunging forward. He slammed his emitter into the beacon, runes interfacing in a blaze of code. Plasma surged, cauterizing circuits, but the leader backhanded him aside—impact like a battering ram, sending Terry skidding across gravel that tore at his uniform. Elara and Lirael closed in. Vines erupted from the floor, coiling around the leader’s legs with barbed grips that drew oily blood. Lirael conjured a torrent, lightning forking from her palms to chain across the brutes, charring hides and exploding joints in showers of molten slag. One brute charged, its fist cratering the

ground where Harlan rolled aside; the instructor countered with a grenade that bloomed into a kinetic blast, hurling the brute into a corruption-cluster. The corruption ignited, boiling in a geyser of steam that scalded the air. Kael patched a squad member's suit, his hands steady despite the chaos. "Beacon's tying to the nexus above—fortify from here, or the whole grid fails." He tossed Terry an auxiliary core, the device buzzing hot in his palm. The leader wrenched free, vines snapping like whips, and bolted for a side tunnel. "The prophecy unfolds—your blood calls the renewal!" His beacon pulsed once more, breach widening to spit a fresh wave: projections of Sundering warriors, now fully manifested, hammers and blades gleaming with corruption-shards. Terry integrated the core, his weave stabilizing the obelisk in a web of energy that clamped the breach shut. The chamber trembled, corruption veins retracting with wet pops, but external booms thundered—siege rams battering the wards overhead, debris raining through fissures. They raced back, hauling the wounded. In the nexus chamber, the prophecy hologram flared anew, words etching into the air: "The prodigy binds the scar, or the Sundering devours all." Terry's father loomed larger in the projection, his face etched with regret, a hidden role as both savior and saboteur. Elara reinforced the crystal seal with root-barriers, thorns anchoring deep into stone. Lirael channeled winds to seal cracks, gales howling against the influx. Harlan's squad manned the perimeter, drones swarming to patch hull breaches. Yet the floor fractured—a titanic corruption vein erupting from below, spewing abominations that clawed toward the core. Terry fired, plasma piercing through the first, but more swarmed. A fresh rumble swelled, not from the corruption veins. From the breach's dying gasp—a claw, enormous and corruption-veined, scraped the edge.

Chapter 4: Claws from the Depths

The reinforced floor of the nexus chamber buckled with a screech like tearing hull plating, shards of alloy spraying outward as the titanic claw erupted from below. Its surface gleamed with oily black corruption, veins of pulsating quartz threading through scales that flexed like living armor. Each talon, longer than a

man's height, gouged furrows into the duracrete, sending tremors rippling through the chamber. The air thickened with the acrid tang of ozone mingled with something sweeter, like scorched caramel—corruption's signature reek. Consoles sparked and died, their screens fracturing under the strain, while emergency klaxons wailed in staccato bursts. Terry Prince skidded back, his boots scraping against the debris, fingers already dancing over his wrist gauntlet's interface. "Grid amplifiers at full—target the joints!" he barked, his voice slicing through the din like a blade. A smirk twitched at his lips, masking the adrenaline surge; this was his domain, techno-magic turning chaos into precision. He thrust his palm forward, and lances of superheated plasma erupted from his gauntlet, azure streaks slamming into the claw's wrist with explosive force. The impact vaporized a layer of corrupted scale, molten droplets sizzling as they splattered across the floor, eating through metal in sizzling pits. Elara Voss rolled to the side, her lithe form weaving between falling chunks of ceiling. She planted her feet wide, hands sinking into the chamber's edge where engineered vines—her own hybrid weave of sylvan essence and academy bio-fibers—had already sprouted from the cracks. "You're aiming too high, Terry—it's regenerating faster than you can burn!" Her tone carried an edge, not accusation but a tactical nudge, her gaze sharpening as she channeled her will. Thick tendrils of thorny green lashed upward, coiling around the claw's forearm with a whip-crack snap. They tightened, thorns piercing the corruption-crusted hide, drawing out gouts of viscous black ichor that steamed on contact with the air. The vines strained, fibers creaking under the appendage's thrashing, but they held, anchoring the beast's limb in place. Lirael Thorne crouched nearby, her cloak whipping in the gusts from the widening breach below—a jagged maw belching forth wisps of distorted air that warped the light into prismatic fractures. She gripped her stormstaff, knuckles blanching around the rune-etched wood, her breath steady despite the flicker of doubt in her gaze. Terry's brash weave had stabilized breaches before, but this... this felt like inviting the storm inside. "Vines won't hold forever—cover me!" She didn't wait for affirmation, slamming the staff down. A bolt of raw lightning arced from her fingertips, forking into the claw's exposed underbelly with a thunderous crack. The strike charred flesh to brittle char, electricity dancing along the quartz

veins in brilliant blue flares, but the limb convulsed, shattering a nearby support pillar in retaliation. Shrapnel whizzed past, embedding in the walls with dull thuds. Instructor Harlan's squad fanned out behind them, five hardened figures in tactical gear, rifles buzzing with charged rounds. Harlan himself, grizzled and broad-shouldered, leveled his weapon from behind a toppled console, his jaw clenched in grim lines. "Flank and suppress—aim for the base!" he bellowed, squeezing the trigger. A barrage of kinetic slugs peppered the claw's knuckles, each impact blooming into craters that wept corruption. The squad moved in sync, boots thudding the quaking floor, their fire stitching a lethal pattern that forced the appendage to retract slightly, buying precious seconds. The claw lashed out again, sweeping low and shattering a bank of mana converters in a shower of sparks and twisted wreckage. Terry dodged, plasma grid flickering to life around him—a shimmering barrier of ionized energy that deflected a flying chunk of debris with a resonant buzz. He pivoted, amplifying his weave through the chamber's failing nexus core; the air buzzed with building charge as his grid expanded, a lattice of searing blue lines converging on the claw's elbow. "Now—sever it!" The plasma intensified, slicing deep with a high-pitched whine, superheating the air until it warped like a mirage. Flesh and scale sloughed away in molten rivulets, pooling on the floor where it bubbled and hardened into jagged spikes. Elara's vines constricted further, thorns grinding against bone with audible crunches, while Lirael's lightning chained from bolt to bolt, illuminating the chamber in staccato flashes. The squad's rifles thundered in unison, slugs burrowing into the weakened joint. The claw shuddered, a guttural bellow echoing from the breach below—some titanic horror voicing its rage. With a final, wrenching twist, the appendage tore free at the elbow, the severed end thrashing wildly before going limp. Black ichor fountained upward, splattering across the group; where it touched, it sizzled against armor and skin, forcing hasty wipes with sleeves that left faint, oily stains. Chest heaving, Terry lowered his gauntlet, the grid dissipating in fading sparks. He strode forward, kicking aside a chunk of the fallen claw, its quartz growths still twitching faintly. "That's one less limb for whatever's down there. Harlan, probe the breach—log any residual signatures." His posture straightened, a subtle tilt of his chin conveying satisfaction, even

as sweat beaded on his brow. Harlan nodded curtly, slinging his rifle and pulling a portable analyzer from his belt. As the squad formed a perimeter, rifles trained on the ragged hole in the floor—now oozing slower tendrils of corruption—he knelt at the edge. "Already on it. But look here—debris from the leader's path." He gestured to a crumpled data slate half-buried in rubble, its screen cracked but glowing faintly. Elara knelt beside him, her fingers brushing away dust with careful precision, while Lirael hovered, staff at the ready, her free hand flexing as if to conjure a gale against any lurking threat. Terry activated the slate with a quick runic pulse from his gauntlet, the device flickering to life. Encrypted files scrolled across the fractured display—holographic projections stuttering into view: schematics of breach amplifiers, manifests of corrupted artifacts shipped from off-world caches, and a manifest linking the armored leader to a group calling itself the Veil Concord. "Weaponizing the Sundering," Terry muttered, his gaze sharpening as he traced a finger over a projected emblem—a fractured multiversal glyph. "They're not just breaching—they're harvesting the corruption for syndicate conquest. My father's research notes... they're embedded here." Elara's brow furrowed, her hand pausing mid-gesture over a sprouting vine that sealed a minor leak in the floor. "Your father's? Terry, if this ties back to him, we can't chase blind. The Concord's reach—" A low groan echoed from the chamber walls, duracrete splintering in spiderweb patterns as the floor tilted. Distant rumbles grew to a roar, the nexus core overhead sparking wildly, its containment fields failing in cascades of blue energy. "No time for debates," Lirael sliced in, her voice taut, staff whipping up to deflect a falling beam with a gale that hurled it aside. She shot Terry a sidelong glance, her grip tightening—a silent push against his certainty. "Leader's trail leads down. We follow, or this place buries us." Harlan pocketed the slate, signaling his squad. "She's right. Breach is stabilizing, but the sublevels are venting—corruption's spreading. Move!" The group charged into the breach, rappelling lines deploying from their gear as they descended into the academy's uncharted underbelly. The air grew heavier, laced with that burnt-sugar stench, walls veined with throbbing black corruption that pulsed like exposed arteries. Faint chimes echoed from deeper quartz-laced caverns—remnants of Crysthaven's influence bleeding through the breach? Terry's

gauntlet probed ahead, illuminating twisting passages where service conduits had warped into fleshy tunnels, dripping with oily residue. They forged ahead, boots splashing through shallow pools of ichor that clung like tar, rifles and staves raised against shadows that stirred unnaturally. Elara whispered to a cluster of resilient fungi sprouting from the walls, coaxing faint glows to light their path, while Lirael's winds cleared delirious mirages that clawed at their vision—illusory insects that dissolved into harmless vapor under her gales. Deeper still, the veins thickened, converging on a cavernous void where seismic shifts ground crystals to powder underfoot. A titanic silhouette loomed in the gloom beyond, its form half-glimpsed through pulsing barriers: something enormous, awakening with a rumble that shook loose stalactites, crashing down in a hail of razor-edged shards. The leader's armored silhouette darted ahead, vanishing into a side passage, but the group's pursuit halted at the threshold, the air buzzing with nascent power. Terry raised his gauntlet, plasma flickering to life, as Elara's vines snaked along the walls for purchase, and Lirael's storm gathered in crackling clouds overhead. Harlan's squad took firing positions, breaths syncing in the tense hush. The abomination stirred, a single eye—glowing with corruption's malevolent shimmer—cracking open in the dark.

The eye's glow flared, a sickly amber that pierced the cavern's gloom like a forge ember, casting jagged shadows across the pulsating corruption veins webbing the walls. A low, grinding screech reverberated as the abomination stirred, its titanic form uncoiling from the void—a hulking mass of fused stone and corruption, armored plates of warped quartz grinding against sinewy tendrils that lashed out like flailing chains. The air thickened with ozone, particles buzzing against exposed skin, and Terry's gauntlet whirred in warning, sensors flaring red as seismic tremors buckled the floor beneath them. "Flank it—Elara, bind the base; Lirael, suppress the limbs!" Terry bellowed, his fingers flexing over his gauntlet's controls, assessing tactics: a direct plasma lance might pierce the core but peril collapsing the cavern on them all, or he could grid the air to contain its thrash, buying Harlan's squad a clear shot. The appendage's sweep could pulverize them against the corruption-veined walls, so he pivoted left, boots skidding on crystal grit, aiming to

draw its focus while the others maneuvered. Elara dropped to a crouch, her palms slamming into the damp earth, fingers digging into fissures where resilient roots still clung amid the corruption. Vines erupted from the soil in a frenzy of green fury, thick as cables and barbed with thorns that rasped against stone as they surged toward the brute's underbelly. They coiled around a protruding limb—a titanic claw, obsidian-scaled and dripping ichor that sizzled on contact with her growths—yanking it sideways with a crack that splintered nearby stalactites. The impact jolted her shoulders, roots straining against the pull, but she held, sweat beading on her brow as she channeled more, her breath coming in measured huffs to steady the drain. Lirael thrust her staff forward, knuckles blanching around the haft, her emerald gaze sharpening at the claw's arc—too wide a swing to fully evade if she conjured a full gale, better to pinpoint and shred. Thunder cracked overhead, her stormweave birthing a maelstrom of razor winds that howled through the chamber, slicing into the appendage's joints with audible tears of flesh and metal. Shards of crystallized corruption flew like shrapnel, one grazing her cheek and drawing a thin line of blood that welled hot and coppery, but she didn't flinch, twisting her stance to redirect the gale and pin the claw mid-lunge. Harlan's squad fanned out behind makeshift barricades of fallen debris, rifles buzzing to life with a chorus of charged coils. "Breach and volley—aim for the corruption veins!" the professor bellowed, his staff igniting in a blaze of ether that lit his scarred face in stark relief. The soldiers knelt in sync, barrels tracking the bound limb, and unleashed a barrage: sizzling bolts of superheated plasma streaked across the void, piercing into the claw's exposed undersides. Explosions bloomed in bursts of molten rock, the air filling with the acrid tang of vaporized stone, and one trooper grunted as recoil jammed his shoulder against a jagged outcrop, bruising bone with a sharp twinge that made his next shot waver. Terry seized the opening, his gauntlet surging with a high-pitched whir as he wove a plasma grid—intersecting lances of azure fire that snapped into place like a net of lightning, encircling the claw's thrashing form. The energy fields crackled, superheating the air until it warped visibly, and the appendage convulsed, black ichor boiling off in steaming rivulets that ate pits into the floor. He clenched his jaw, muscles taut from the weave's feedback

vibrating up his arm, calculating the grid's strain: hold too long, and it'd overload, scorching his own gauntlet and anyone too close. The brute bellowed—a guttural roar that vibrated through their chests, dislodging more debris in a pelting rain of quartz fragments. One chunk clipped a squad member's helmet, denting the visor and leaving his vision starred with cracks, forcing him to fire blind for the next volley. The claw buckled under the combined assault, vines snapping taut before severing with wet pops, winds carving furrows deep enough to expose pulsing conduits beneath the scales. Plasma bolts converged on the weakened joint, erupting in a fountain of slag that cascaded across the cavern, pooling and hissing as it corroded the corruption veins feeding the abomination. With a final, earth-shaking wrench, the appendage tore free, tumbling into the void below in a cascade of sparks and gore, the impact far down sending up a plume of dust that choked the air. The eye dimmed, the titanic form retreating with a slithering grind, but the victory rang hollow—the severed claw's stump wept corruption that spread like ink across the floor, veins pulsing brighter, threading toward hidden depths. Chest heaving, Terry lowered his gauntlet, steam rising from its vents as he surveyed the aftermath: craters pocked the ground, walls scored with charred gashes, and Elara's vines lay in tatters, their tips blackened and curling. Lirael leaned on her staff, wiping blood from her cheek with the back of her hand, her gaze flicking to Terry—not with accusation, but a tight press of her lips that spoke of the close call, her winds dying to a faint breeze that stirred the dust. "Data slate—it's here," Harlan grunted, kicking aside a chunk of the claw's debris to reveal a glinting device half-buried in the ichor. He fished it out with his staff, the ether glow repelling the oily residue, and activated it with a jab. Holographic projections flickered to life, bathing the group in ethereal blue: schematics of breach amplifiers, logs of shipments from off-world syndicates, and a masked figure—the armored leader—coordinating with shadowed contacts. "Syndicate's pulling strings across the veil," Harlan read aloud, his voice gravelly. "Weaponizing the Sundering's projections—corruption as a tool for conquest, not chaos. Ties back to the old breaches, the ones that scarred the continents." Elara knelt beside a pulsating vein, her fingers hovering without touching, tracing its oily shimmer that carried the sharp bite

of burnt sugar mingling with the cavern's mineral tang. "It's calling to something bigger. Feel the pull?" She glanced at Terry, her brow furrowing in quiet challenge to his tech-first certainty, but she rose without pressing, slinging her bow over her shoulder. The chamber trembled, cracks spidering across the ceiling as deeper rumbles swelled, loose crystals rattling like chimes in a gale. Liraels winds picked up instinctively, swirling to clear the thickening haze, but her stance shifted uneasily—delirious flickers at the edges, mirages of grasping hands that solidified into fleeting claws before dissipating. "Leader's not far. Those veins are mapping a path—straight to whatever's waking below." Terry nodded curtly, pocketing a shard of the claw for analysis later, his gauntlet recalibrating with a series of clicks. Fleeing upward meant sealing the academy from above, but that'd trap the corruption to fester; forging ahead down risked the unknown pull dragging them under. He chose the descent, gesturing to the widening fissure where the leader's trail vanished—boots first, plasma ready. "Squad, cover the rear. We end this at the source." They rappelled into the fissure, lines buzzing as they dropped into narrower sublevels, the air growing oppressively warm and humid, like breathing through wet cloth. Walls closed in, slick with residue that clung to gloves and gear, and the veins here pulsed in rhythm, thicker, almost rhythmic, guiding toward a distant glow. Elara coaxed bioluminescent spores from her pouch to cling to the surfaces, their soft verdant light revealing side tunnels choked with crystalline growths that tinkled underfoot like breaking glass. Lirael took point, her staff probing ahead to shatter illusory barriers—swarms of phantom insects that buzzed with deceptive solidity, one nipping at her arm before a gale dispersed it, leaving a welt that throbbed with phantom itches. Harlan's squad trailed, rifles sweeping shadows, one soldier muttering about the gravity's subtle drag, as if the depths pulled harder than physics allowed. Deeper, the passage opened into a vaulted expanse, veins converging on a central pit where corruption bubbled like tar in a cauldron. Faint reverberations of ritual chants drifted up, the leader's armored form silhouetted against the glow, hands raised over a rune-etched console. But the ground lurched, a fresh tremor birthing cracks that spewed oily geysers, and from the pit rose not one abomination, but tendrils of something vaster—enormous, multi-limbed, its surface

a mosaic of writhing corruption that hinted at a body too titanic to fully emerge yet. Terry's gauntlet flared, plasma coiling in his palm as he assessed the breach: overload the console to disrupt the ritual, or target the tendrils first to prevent them coiling around the group. Elara's vines slithered along the edges, seeking purchase, while Lirael's storm gathered in low rumbles, the air crackling with impending fury. Harlan signaled a halt, squad kneeling to brace, as the first tendril whipped toward them, shattering stone in a spray of debris that forced Terry to dive aside, rolling to his feet with grit biting into his palms.

The tendril lashed again, its tip blooming into a cluster of barbed hooks that gouged furrows in the vaulted ceiling, raining chunks of masonry. Terry lunged forward, gauntlet buzzing as he channeled a lance of superheated plasma piercing into the appendage's core. The beam struck true, sizzling through oily flesh with a sizzle like frying fat, vaporizing a section into acrid steam that stung his eyes. Black ichor sprayed, splattering the stone and sizzling as it etched pits into the floor. "Grid it!" Terry bellowed, twisting to weave a lattice of crackling energy across the pit's mouth. The plasma grid flared to life, threads of blue-white fire interlocking like a net of molten wire, scorching the emerging tendrils on contact. One recoiled, smoking, but the ground lurched in response, birthing a titanic claw from the depths—talons the length of cargo haulers, armored in crystalline corruption that gleamed with inner fractures. Elara dropped to one knee beside him, her fingers digging into the slick residue coating the ledge. Vines erupted from her palms, thick as mooring cables, propelled by a surge of verdant force that split the air with a whip-crack. They snaked toward the claw, coiling around a talon and yanking with brute tension, fibers straining audibly as they bit into the corruption. "Pin the joints—it's armored, but the gaps bleed," she said, her voice steady, gaze flicking to Terry's grid for a beat longer than necessary, a subtle nod approving his containment before she turned back to feed more growth from her reserves. Lirael spun her staff overhead, conjuring a maelstrom of wind that howled through the chamber, carrying the metallic tang of charged air. Lightning forked from the gale, jagged bolts hammering the claw's surface in staccato bursts, each impact exploding shards of crystal that pinged off walls like

shrapnel. A stray bolt grazed a squad member's shoulder plate, leaving a charred divot, and he winced but held his firing stance. "Flank low—storm's scattering the spray, but don't bunch up," Lirael called, her free hand clenching the staff tighter, knuckles blanching as she glanced at Elara's vines, lips pressing thin in what might have been doubt over the strain they placed on the earth already buckling beneath. Harlan's squad fanned out, boots scraping for purchase on the tilting floor. Rifles crackled in unison, kinetic rounds punching into the claw's underbelly where plasma and lightning had softened the corruption. Bullets ricocheted with sharp whines, one embedding in a pulsating vein that burst like overripe fruit, oozing sludge that filled the air with burnt-sugar stench. Harlan himself leveled his sidearm at a secondary tendril probing from the pit's edge, firing a burst that severed it clean, the limb thrashing in death throes before dissolving into fizzing residue. He shot Terry a quick glance over his shoulder, brow furrowing as he reloaded. "Your grid's holding the flow—smart pivot, but we need that console before this thing hauls us down with it." The claw flexed, talons raking the plasma grid and sending sparks cascading like fireworks. Terry felt the feedback jolt through his arm, muscles seizing for a split second, but he poured more power in, the lattice thickening to a blazing barrier that melted the tips of the hooks into slag. Heat waves distorted the air, sweat beading on his forehead and trickling salt into his mouth. Elara's vines creaked under the counter-pull, roots anchoring deeper into cracks, but a tremor split one coil, forcing her to grunt and redirect growth toward reinforcement. Lirael's storm swelled, winds whipping dust into stinging veils, her hair lashing her face as she funneled another bolt—thunderclap echoing off walls, the claw's surface fracturing with a sound like cracking ice. Rifle fire escalated, squad members advancing in short bursts, boots thudding the quaking stone. One soldier—a wiry woman with a scarred cheek—hosed a spurting vein, her rounds vaporizing the flow before it could pool and spread. "Veins are retreating—keep the pressure!" Harlan bellowed, his voice slicing through the din as he dashed forward, snatching a fallen data slate from near the rune-etched console the leader had abandoned in haste. The armored figure had bolted during the initial lash, silhouette vanishing into a side archway choked with crystalline webs, but the slate buzzed in

Harlan's grip, its screen flickering to life under his thumb swipe. Terry spared it a glance while steadying his grid, the device projecting holographic fragments: encrypted logs scrolling with syndicate insignias—interlocking breaches encircled by chain motifs—and manifests detailing "Aetherium Harvest Protocols." Names blurred, but one stood out: Prince, linked to experimental breach stabilizers, tied to the leader's alias, "Vanguard Echo." Harlan's jaw clenched, fingers tapping a decryption rune on the slate's edge, pulling raw data into view—schematics for weaponizing corruption, multiversal conduits to siphon the Sundering's raw power for syndicate conquests across fractured worlds. "Encrypted ties to off-world players," Harlan muttered, holding the slate aloft so the squad glimpsed the projections amid the chaos. "They're not just breaching—they're priming a cascade. Leader's no lone wolf; this is coordinated harvest." He tossed the device to Terry, who caught it one-handed, the weight grounding him as another tendril probed the grid's edge, sizzling on contact. Elara's vines finally locked the claw's pivot, hauling it sideways with a groan of tearing crystal. The appendage buckled, talons scraping deep gouges that spewed corruption in geysers, but the flow stemmed as Lirael's lightning arced through the weakened joints, superheating the ichor into brittle glass that shattered under rifle impacts. The squad poured fire into the fractures, rounds thudding home like hammers on anvil, until the claw convulsed once—ground shuddering violently—and retracted into the pit with a wet slurp, dragging debris and residue after it. The breach narrowed, edges sealing with reluctant crusts of cooled slag, but the air still buzzed with residual quakes, walls groaning like stressed beams. Terry deactivated his grid, the sudden silence ringing in his ears, plasma coils cooling with faint pops. He surveyed the slate's logs, holograms dancing over his gauntlet—evidence of his father's old prototypes repurposed for this syndicate's arsenal, breaches as weapons to mutate armies, conquer realms scarred by the old cataclysm. Arrogance flickered in his smirk, quickly schooled as he pocketed the device. "They twisted his work. We take this proof topside—expose the chain." But the vault buckled further, a ceiling beam crashing down in a cascade of dust that choked throats and blurred vision. Lirael coughed, waving her staff to clear a path with a gale, her emerald gaze sharpening at the side archway where the

leader had fled. “Proof won’t matter if that thing fully wakes. Pursuit now—before the veins reroute.” She jabbed her staff toward the passage, a brief spark leaping from the tip, her stance widening as if bracing against invisible pull, revealing her push for immediate chase over consolidation. Elara rose, brushing residue from her sleeves, vines retracting into her skin with faint rustles. She eyed the bubbling pit, then the archway, fingers flexing as she conjured a fresh coil to probe the path ahead. “Veins are thickening there—it’s drawing power. Agreed, but mark the traps; illusions hide pitfalls.” Her gesture toward Lirael was economical, a tilt of chin acknowledging the stormweaver’s urgency while suggesting caution, tactical friction sparking in the shared glance. Harlan nodded, signaling his squad to regroup, rifles slung but hands hovering near triggers. One soldier—a burly man with grease-streaked arms—kicked a crystalline shard aside, muttering, “Deeper means heavier drag; my pack’s already snagging.” He adjusted his harness with a yank, opinion clear in the efficient motion: equip and move, no dawdling. Terry led the descent into the archway, boots crunching over tinkling growths that parted like frost under heat. The passage sloped steeper, air thickening to a humid press that slicked skin and fogged lenses. Pulsating veins lined the walls now, thicker than before—bulbous conduits throbbing in sync, each pulse sending vibrations up his legs, hinting at something enormous stirring below, its awakenings rippling through the stone like a heartbeat building to frenzy. Elara’s spores clung to the ceiling, casting erratic green glows that danced over the group’s forms, revealing side crevices where corruption seeped in lazy rivulets. Lirael probed with wind bursts, dispersing a haze of phantom motes that solidified into needle-sharp flecks, one grazing Harlan’s boot and leaving a sizzling mark. He grunted, stamping it out, but forged ahead without pause. Deeper still, the vein rhythm accelerated, walls buzzing with contained force. A low rumble echoed from ahead—not chants this time, but the grind of shifting mass, titanic limbs testing their confines. Terry’s gauntlet warmed in warning, plasma priming as the path widened into another chasm, the leader’s trail marked by discarded armor shards glinting in the spore-light. But from the gloom below rose a fresh tremor, ground fracturing to expose a glimpse of scaled hide, vast and veined, the air filling with ozone bite and the promise of claws

far larger than the last. The group halted at the lip, rifles raising in unison, as a guttural scrape echoed up—something uncoiling, hungry for the breach.

The guttural scrape swelled into a thunderous crack, stone splintering like brittle bone under the strain. Terry's gauntlet buzzed, plasma coils igniting with a sharp whir as he thrust his arm forward, unleashing a searing lance that bored into the gloom. The beam struck scaled hide with a sizzle, vaporizing a patch of oily corruption and eliciting a bellow that shook dust from the ceiling. "Target the joints!" he bellowed, voice slicing through the din, his stance wide to brace against the recoil. Elara uncoiled her bracers in a fluid twist, vines lashing out like barbed whips to snare the emerging limb—a titanic talon, ridged with crystalline barbs that wept black ichor. The tendrils wrapped tight, thorns digging in to anchor, but the claw flexed with brute force, dragging her forward a step. She dug her heels into the fractured ledge, jaw clenched in grim lines, sweat beading on her brow as she channeled growth through the vines, forcing them to swell and constrict. "It's anchoring—pull it off balance!" Her words carried an edge, aimed at Terry's plasma barrage; too wild, and it'd shatter the ledge beneath them all. Lirael spun her staff overhead, wind shearing the air into a howling maelstrom that funneled toward the chasm. Gusts battered the claw, flinging shards of rock and forcing the appendage to retract an inch, but the stormweaver's emerald gaze sharpened at Elara's strain. "Ease off the bind—it's coiling for a swipe!" The caution laced her tone, a veiled prod at Terry's aggressive weave; his tech might burn bright, but it invited retaliation. Harlan's squad fanned out along the lip, rifles crackling in staccato bursts. Bolts of ionized rounds peppered the hide, punching craters that sizzled with acrid steam. The burly soldier—Krag, Terry recalled from earlier drills—braced his weapon on a knee, firing measured volleys that traced glowing paths through the haze. "Flank it low—aim for the veins!" Harlan ordered, his own shot grazing a pulsating conduit, bursting it in a spray of viscous fluid that corroded the air with burnt-sugar stench. The claw lunged upward, barbs raking the edge and sending a chunk of ledge plummeting into the void. Terry sidestepped the debris, his kinetic shield flaring to deflect a flying fragment, the impact

jarring his arm like a hammer blow. He rerouted power from his gauntlet, weaving a grid of plasma filaments that arced across the chasm, slicing into the talon with molten precision. Flesh parted in cauterized strips, the brute below thundering—a sound like grinding tectonic plates that vibrated through their bones. Elara's vines held, but the strain showed in her gritted teeth; she released one coil to lash at a secondary vein snaking up the wall, severing it with a wet snap. Black ooze bubbled from the wound, hardening into jagged spikes that clattered against the stone. "It's feeding off the breach—cut the flow, or it'll regenerate!" Her glance at Lirael held tactical weight: coordinate the storm, don't just scatter it. Lirael obliged with a sharp nod, her wind torrent twisting into a spiraling lance that hammered the claw's base, eroding scales and exposing raw, throbbing tissue. The air crackled with ozone, her bracers sparking as she poured mana into the gale, but a backlash rippled up—delirious motes that bloomed in her vision, turning Harlan's squad into snarling mutants mid-reload. She blinked hard, shaking off the phantom growls that clawed at her ears, knees buckling briefly from the nauseating twist in her gut. "Illusions incoming—focus fire!" The squad forged ahead undeterred, Krag's rounds chewing through a barb cluster while Harlan lobbed a grenade that detonated in a flash of EMP pulse, shorting out corruption nodes along the limb. The claw shuddered, retracting with a screech of protesting stone, but not before its tip grazed Terry's shield, shearing a gash that sparked and smoked. He staggered, tasting blood from a bitten lip, arrogance flickering into focus as he recalibrated his weave. "Grid's holding—reroute to sever!" Together, they hammered the appendage: plasma grids melting joints, vines entangling to immobilize, winds eroding support, rifles pummeling weak points. The talon convulsed once, twice, then tore free in a cascade of rubble, plummeting into the depths with a distant splash. Silence fell, broken only by chests heaving and the drip of ichor from the walls. Terry swiped sweat from his eyes, gauntlet cooling with a faint glow. "That's one down. Probe for more." His tone brooked no delay, but Elara's raised brow spoke volumes—reckless push, no recon. She knelt by a fallen shard of armor from the leader's trail, bracer vines probing its surface. The metal buzzed faintly, unlocking with a click to project a holographic log: flickering images of the armored figure

in a shadowed vault, voice distorted but clear. “Syndicate directive: harness Sundering remnants. Eldergard nexus primes the weapon—corruption as vector for multiversal breach. Prince’s bloodline seals the code.” The projection winked out, leaving the air charged. Harlan’s face hardened, rifle slung as he surveyed the data fragment. “Ties to off-world cabals. Your father, kid?” The question hung, tactical and probing for fracture—trust the prodigy, or question his lineage? Terry’s fingers clenched the gauntlet, knuckles blanching, but he shoved the data chip into his interface. “Irrelevant now. Leader’s heading deeper—follow the veins.” Friction crackled; Lirael’s wind probe dispersed lingering motes, her silence a pointed weight on his haste. The chasm floor lay exposed below, a jagged drop into steaming fissures where corruption veins pulsed like arteries. They rappelled down in tense formation, ropes groaning under weight, boots thudding on slick, veined stone. The air grew heavier, laced with chemical bite that stung eyes and coated tongues. Elara’s spores illuminated the descent, revealing cavern walls etched with ancient runes now warped by corruption—symbols twisting into mocking faces that leered in the green light. Halfway down, the ground lurched, a fresh rumble signaling pursuit. Lirael deflected a surge of delirious flecks with a gale, the motes bursting into illusory flames that seared her skin with phantom heat before dissolving. She cursed under her breath, staff trembling slightly. “These veins are linked—it’s calling reinforcements.” Krag grunted, securing his line with a yank. “Then we cut the call. Squad, breach charges ready.” His efficiency masked wariness, eyes flicking to Terry’s glowing gauntlet—tech ally, or liability? They hit bottom amid a spray of grit, the impact jarring joints. The chamber sprawled vast, a subterranean vault honeycombed with crystalline growths that chimed like wind bells. The leader’s trail veered toward a glowing archway, but veins thickened here, bulbous and throbbing, feeding into a central pit where something stirred—scaled flanks heaving, eyes like molten slits cracking open. Terry primed his plasma, lunging forward. “Flank and contain—” A vein erupted nearby, spewing corruption that solidified into a swarm of chitinous crawlers, mandibles clicking. Elara’s vines swept them into a crushing mass, but one latched onto a squad member’s leg, corroding boot and flesh in sizzling agony. He bellowed, firing point-blank to shatter it,

blood mixing with ichor. Lirael conjured a lightning arc that forked through the swarm, electrocuting clusters in crackling bursts, the air filling with charred ozone. “Push through—it’s buying time!” Her storm clashed with Terry’s grid, a near-miss sending sparks dancing across his shield; she shot him a glare, accusation in the emerald gaze sharpening: overreach endangers us all. Harlan covered the flank, rifle suppressing a bulging vein that birthed more crawlers. “Data log’s got coords—syndicate’s core below. But this pit’s waking. Ideas?” Terry interfaced with a nearby console, runes flickering under his weave. “Overload the veins—divert power to collapse it.” His smirk twitched at his lips, but Elara’s vines already probed the pit’s edge, testing. She shook her head subtly. “Too volatile—could chain-react upward.” Tension coiled; Lirael’s winds held back a fresh wave, her stance rigid. The pit’s occupant shifted, a low groan echoing as claws scraped—larger, hungrier. Harlan’s squad reloaded in sync, but a distant explosion rocked the vault, ceiling cracking. They charged the archway, blasts and gusts clearing a path through writhing veins. The leader’s silhouette vanished into the gloom beyond, but the stirring below accelerated, ground fracturing underfoot. A secondary claw breached the pit’s rim, shattering crystal and lunging with whip-speed. Terry’s plasma met it mid-strike, but the impact hurled him back, shield buckling. Elara ensnared it, vines straining. The brute’s roar drowned their shouts, scales gleaming with fresh corruption. Deeper tremors built, the archway trembling as if the abyss itself hungered to swallow them whole.

Chapter 5: Fractured Depths and Hidden Legacies

The tunnel walls pulsed like veins under strain, slick with an oily residue that dripped in heavy globs, each one sizzling faintly against the fractured stone floor. Terry gripped his nexus gauntlet tighter, the buzz of its power core vibrating up his arm as he led the way, flashlight beam slicing through the dim haze. Behind him, Elara’s boots scraped softly, her fingers trailing along the uneven rock, coaxing faint green glows from embedded fungi to light their path. Lirael flanked her, bow slung over

her shoulder, emerald gaze sharpening against the acrid tang of ozone that thickened the air, mingled with the cloying sweetness of burnt-sugar stench—like caramel left too long on a hot coil. Harlan's squad brought up the rear: four hardened veterans in scuffed tactical gear, their rifles slung low, boots thudding in disciplined rhythm. The instructor himself surveyed the ceiling with a handheld scanner, its screen flickering erratically from interference. "These fissures are widening," he muttered, voice gravelly over the distant rumble of shifting earth. "One wrong step, and we're swimming in that black sludge." Terry shot him a sidelong glance, the corner of his mouth twitching in a tight smirk. "That's why we stick to the weave. Archaic scouting won't catch the anomalies before they erupt." He tapped his gauntlet, projecting a holographic grid that mapped the tunnel's structural integrity—red lines spiderwebbing where stress points threatened to give. A low sizzle echoed ahead, like steam escaping a ruptured pipe. Elara froze, her hand snapping up to signal halt. "Listen," she whispered, nostrils flaring. The air grew heavier, charged with static that made Terry's hair prickle. Then the ground lurched—not a full collapse, but a ripple that sent pebbles skittering like startled insects. From cracks in the floor, veins of corruption surged upward, black and shimmering, coiling like serpents uncoiling from torpor. They thickened mid-air, crystallizing into jagged barbs that whipped toward the group. Terry reacted first, gauntlet flaring as he unleashed a lance of superheated plasma that pierced forward—a searing blue-white bolt that vaporized the nearest tendril in a burst of acrid steam, leaving a scorched crater in the stone. "Flank it!" Harlan bellowed, his squad fanning out. Rifles crackled in unison, bullets laced with stormweave charges—courtesy of Lirael's earlier enchantment—exploding against the veins in showers of splintered crystal. One shard grazed a soldier's helmet, embedding with a wet thunk; he staggered, yanking it free with a grunt as black ichor oozed from the puncture, but Lirael was there, slamming her palm against his shoulder to channel a jolt of purifying electricity that cauterized the wound, the air popping with the scent of singed flesh. But the hallucinations hit harder than the veins. The tunnel warped in Terry's vision first—a swirl of colors bleeding from the walls, coalescing into phantom insects the size of fists, their wings an iridescent blur. They buzzed to-

ward him, mandibles clacking, and he swung his gauntlet wildly, plasma arc slashing empty air. “Illusions!” he snarled, shaking his head to clear the disorientation, but one latched onto his forearm, its grip like icy needles piercing skin. He felt the burn spread, a false fire that made his muscles seize—until Elara’s vine lash whipped out, thorny tendrils erupting from her sleeves to ensnare the swarm. The plants crushed the apparitions with a series of wet snaps, real enough to draw sap-like blood from her conjured growths. “They’re burrowing into your senses,” Elara said through gritted teeth, wiping sweat from her brow. Her vines retracted with a rustle, but not before a vein lashed back, scoring a gash across her thigh. She hissed, the impact driving her knee into the dirt; blood welled hot and sticky, soaking her pants, but she bound the wound with a hasty wrap of summoned bark, the fibers tightening like a vice to stem the flow. Deeper in, the real threats emerged. Crystalline scuttlers skittered from side tunnels—fist-sized horrors with bodies of faceted quartz, legs like splintered glass clicking against the rock. They swarmed in a chittering wave, propelled by bursts of pressurized gas that propelled them in erratic leaps. One collided with Lirael’s chest, its jagged edge raking across her collarbone; she reeled back, the blow cracking against her ribs with a sharp thud that left her wheezing, each breath a labored rasp as pain lanced through her side. She retaliated with a stormweave surge, hands weaving arcs of crackling energy. Lightning forked from her fingertips, chaining through the scuttlers in a web of blue fire, shattering their forms into glittering dust that rained down like deadly confetti. The flash illuminated spectral projections ahead—ghostly silhouettes of Sundering guardians, armored figures from a bygone cataclysm, their forms flickering as if etched in haze. One lunged, its ethereal blade manifesting solid enough to clang against Harlan’s rifle barrel, the impact jarring his arms numb. “Sync up!” Terry bellowed, his voice reverberating off the curving walls. He fired a plasma grid—a lattice of energy bolts that pinned a cluster of scuttlers mid-leap, melting their cores into slag puddles that bubbled and popped. Elara complemented it, her vines bursting from the floor in a tangle of emerald ropes, ensnaring the guardians’ legs and yanking them off-balance. Thorns pierced translucent armor, drawing wisps of shadowy vapor that dissipated with foul, sulfurous fumes. Harlan’s squad poured rifle

fire into the fray, storm-laced rounds detonating like miniature thunderclaps, the blasts shaking the tunnel and sending tremors up Terry's legs. One soldier took a scuttler's pounce to the leg, the creature's weight slamming him down; his knee buckled with a sickening pop, ligament tearing as he cried out, rolling to crush the thing under his boot heel. The acrid smoke from the shots mingled with the ever-present ozone, coating throats raw. They forged ahead, the tunnel narrowing into a choking squeeze where walls wept black ooze. Terry's scanner beeped insistently, highlighting a concealed panel ahead—warped metal disguised by hallucinatory vines that slithered like living ropes. "There," he pointed, blasting the illusion away with a kinetic pulse from his gauntlet. The force rippled outward, shoving Elara back a step; she caught herself against the wall, fingers digging into the stone as phantom thorns pricked her palms. Prying the panel open revealed a hidden archive chamber, its air stale and dust-choked, lit by the faint glow of dormant data crystals. Harlan posted guards at the entrance while Terry interfaced his gauntlet with the central console, runes flickering to life under his runic programming. Files decrypted in bursts: logs from his father, Dr. Elias Prince, detailing early Nexus-weave experiments. Schematics scrolled—blueprints for stabilizing breaches, but twisted in annotations that matched the syndicate's tactics. "He pioneered this," Terry murmured, jaw clenched as he scrolled. His father's notes dismissed "archaic wards" as inefficient relics, pushing for pure techno-magic integration. The same hubris Terry had echoed in lectures, now staring back as the foundation for weaponizing corruption—turning mutations into controllable plagues. Elara peered over his shoulder, her breath warm against his neck. "Your legacy isn't just blood," she said softly, hand resting on his arm—not in comfort, but a steadying grip. Lirael leaned against the console, cradling her bruised ribs, eyes sharp. "Means we fight smarter, not harder. Those 'archaic' methods might've prevented this mess." Terry's fingers hovered, a flicker of doubt tightening his chest, but he downloaded the files with a sharp nod. "We use it against them." He ejected the crystal, pocketing it as the chamber trembled—a deeper quake rattling loose stones from the ceiling. Outside, the ambush erupted without warning. Elite enforcers in powered exosuits burst from concealed vents, their visors glowing crimson. One

hurled corruption-shards—whistling projectiles that embedded in the wall near Harlan, pulsing with corruption that spread like ink in water. The squad unleashed fire, bullets ricocheting off armor with metallic pings, but the enforcers countered with energy whips that cracked like thunder, one lashing out to wrap around a soldier's ankle and yank him into the dark, his scream cut short by a crunch. Terry dove behind an outcrop, plasma charging in his gauntlet. Elara summoned a barrier of woven roots, thick as cables, to block a shard storm; the impacts splintered bark, sending wooden shrapnel flying that nicked her cheek, drawing a thin line of blood. Lirael conjured a gale-force wind, hurling an enforcer against the wall—his suit crumpling with a groan of bending metal, ribs audibly fracturing inside as he slumped, gasping. From the enforcers' midst, the armored leader's voice boomed through a vox-amplifier: "The weave unravels—join it or shatter." He raised a ritual orb, and the tunnel floor split wide, birthing a titanic horror: multi-limbed, its body a writhing mass of chitin and black crystal, tentacles flailing with barbs that gouged furrows in the stone. The brute's roar shook the air, a guttural bellow that pressed against eardrums like physical weight, the ground quaking under its emerging bulk. Terry lunged forward, gauntlet blazing as he fired a plasma lance straight into a limb's joint, the superheated beam sizzling through flesh and severing tendon with a spray of boiling ichor.

The ichor splattered across the cavern floor, sizzling as it etched shallow pits into the stone, releasing an acrid tang of scorched metal and decay. The titanic horror's limb thrashed in response, barbs whipping through the air with a shrill whistle that grazed Harlan's shoulder pauldron, shearing off a chunk of reinforced alloy in a spray of sparks. The squad leader bellowed an order, his voice gravelly over the din: "Flank it—eyes on the vents!" His rifle spat a volley laced with stormweave charges, the rounds crackling as they embedded in the brute's underbelly, blooming into azure arcs that charred chitin and forced a segment of tentacle to retract with a wet snap. Elara rolled to the side, her boots skidding on loose gravel as she thrust both hands toward the brute. Thorny vines erupted from the fractured ground, coiling like pythons around another flailing appendage—their tips piercing deep, drawing out gouts of viscous fluid that steamed

on contact with air. The vines strained, fibers creaking under the pull, but held firm, anchoring the limb long enough for Lirael to channel a bolt of electricity from her fingertips. The strike forked across the titanic horror's joint, superheating the barbs until they glowed cherry-red and drooped, molten droplets pattering like rain onto the enforcers below. One assailant in exosuit armor reeled back, his visor cracking from a stray ember, exposing a grimace twisted in pain. Terry didn't wait for the next swing. He pivoted, gauntlet buzzing as it recalibrated, and unleashed a burst of plasma orbs—each one a fist-sized globe that detonated on impact, carving fist-deep craters into the brute's crystalline hide. The blasts illuminated the cavern in staccato flashes, highlighting the enforcers regrouping: two of them priming grenade launchers that belched corruption-laced payloads, the orbs bursting mid-air to scatter shards like shrapnel across the chamber. One fragment sliced through a squad member's calf, the wound bubbling as black veins spiderwebbed up his leg; he crumpled with a groan, clutching the gash while his comrade dragged him behind a stalagmite. "They're herding us toward the breach!" Lirael bellowed, her words clipped as she summoned a maelstrom to deflect an incoming whip from an enforcer. The gale tore at the energy lash, fraying its tip into harmless flickers, but the effort left her stance wide, sweat beading on her brow from the strain. Elara shot her a glance, fingers flexing as fresh roots snaked out to trip the nearest assailant—his boot caught, sending him sprawling face-first into a vein of corruption that pulsed hungrily, tendrils latching onto his gauntlet and corroding the metal with a fizzing sizzle. Harlan's squad intensified the assault, their rifles chattering in unison. Storm-laced bullets punched through an enforcer's knee joint, the impact crumpling servos with a whir of failing hydraulics; he toppled, clawing at the ground as corruption from his own shard backfired, twisting his fingers into jagged spurs. But the titanic horror adapted, its remaining limbs burrowing into the walls, cracking stone and sending tremors that buckled the floor. From the widening fissure at its base, a chittering swarm spilled forth—crystalline scuttlers, each the size of a fist, their bodies faceted like black diamonds that refracted the plasma glow into eerie rainbows. They skittered across the debris, mandibles clicking with a sound like grinding glass, drawn to the warmth of living flesh. The first wave crashed like a tide.

Scuttlers clambered over a fallen enforcer, burrowing into seams of his suit; muffled screams reverberated as they gnawed through insulation, sparks flying from exposed wiring. Terry stomped one underfoot, its shell shattering with a brittle crunch that sprayed iridescent dust, but dozens more surged toward him, compelled by the breach's oily sheen. He swept his gauntlet in a wide arc, emitting a kinetic pulse that flattened a cluster against the wall—their bodies pulverizing into powder that hung in the air, stinging his eyes with a sharp, mineral bite. Elara knelt, palms slamming the earth to summon a barrier of interlocking brambles; the scuttlers slammed into it, some impaling themselves on thorns that pierced carapace and oozed luminescent innards. Yet the swarm adapted, splitting around the obstacle to flank her—until Lirael unleashed a shockwave of wind infused with lightning, the blast scattering them like leaves in a gale. Dozens shattered mid-leap, fragments tinkling across the stone, but the effort drained her; she gasped, chest heaving, as a stray scuttler latched onto her boot, its claws scraping synth-leather with a rasping screech. "Behind you—projection inbound!" Harlan bellowed, his rifle swinging toward the cavern's shadowed recesses. From the haze of the breach, translucent figures manifested—not illusions, but solid projections of Sundering guardians, their forms clad in rusted plate that clanked with each step. One, a hulking brute with a hammer forged from warped iron, charged the squad; its weapon swung in a brutal arc, smashing a console into twisted scrap and sending a shockwave that bowled over two soldiers, their armor denting from the force. The air grew dense with the scent of rust and ozone, the guardian's eyes burning like embers in a forge. Terry fired a plasma lance into the projection's chest, the beam punching through ethereal armor to vaporize ribs beneath—steam erupted from the wound, the figure staggering as cracks spiderwebbed across its form. But more emerged: archers with bows of petrified bone, unleashing arrows that solidified mid-flight into razor shafts that embedded in the wall with meaty thuds. Elara countered by entangling one guardian's legs with vines that wrapped tight, thorns digging into joints and splintering bone with audible snaps; the brute toppled, hammer clanging uselessly as she drove a root spike through its helm, shattering the projection into dissipating motes that prickled skin like static. Lirael's stormweave turned the tide

against the archers—a maelstrom of electrified air that drew their bolts into a harmless spiral, then hurled the guardians back into the breach's maw. One collided with the wall, plate crumpling like foil, the impact dislodging dust from the ceiling in choking clouds. Harlan's volleys laced with thunder added to the fray, bullets exploding on contact to bore fist-sized holes that belched ethereal ichor, the guardians crumbling amid groans of straining metal and fading war cries. The titanic horror bellowed again, its core pulsing as the breach dilated further, birthing reinforcements: another limb clawing free, this one tipped with a cluster of scuttler pods that hatched mid-swing, unleashing a fresh swarm. Terry's gauntlet overheated, venting steam that scalded his wrist, but he forged ahead, syncing his plasma with Elara's vines to form a lattice that bisected the emerging appendage—superheated barbs fused to thorny bindings, the whole severing in a cascade of molten slag that pooled and hardened into glassy spikes. Chest heaving, the group retreated deeper into the tunnels as the chamber trembled, walls groaning like living things. Scuttlers pursued, their clicks reverberating off narrowing passages, while projection guardians flickered at the edges of vision, hammers raised for pursuit. Lirael sealed a side tunnel with a gale that collapsed it in a rumble of boulders, buying time, but the air grew dense, laced with the burnt-sugar stench of corruption veins erupting from cracks—black ooze bubbling up to form grasping pseudopods that lashed out, corroding a squad member's rifle into slag mid-reload. They burst into a side alcove, a hidden archive chamber half-buried under collapsed masonry. Consoles flickered dimly, screens etched with runes that buzzed faintly. Terry shoved aside a barricade of debris, his fingers smearing with dust as he accessed a central terminal. "Cover me—logs incoming." Elara stood guard at the entrance, vines probing the dark for threats, while Lirael leaned on the wall, channeling a low buzz of static to deter scuttlers probing the threshold. The screen bloomed with encrypted files—his father's handwriting, digitized and stark. Pioneering Nexus-weave trials, blueprints for stabilizing breaches through engineered mana flows. But woven in were anomalies: simulations of controlled mutations, corruption harnessed as a weapon, notes on "archaic bindings" dismissed as inefficient relics. Terry's jaw clenched, gauntlet clenching until servos whirred in protest. The syndicate had

twisted this—his father's hubris, mirrored in his own scorn for the old ways, now fueling the chaos. An enforcer's whip cracked outside, yanking a vine barrier aside. Harlan fired back, his shot coring the assailant's helm in a burst of hydraulics and blood. "We move—now!" The archive trembled, a projection hammer glancing off the doorframe, embedding shards in the console that sparked and died. Terry snatched a data crystal, pocketing it as the group charged onward, the pursuit closing like a noose. Deeper tremors heralded the armored leader's ritual, the breach's howl swelling to a deafening roar.

The group charged into the narrowing vein of tunnel, boots scraping against fractured stone slick with oozing residue. Terry gripped the data crystal in his pocket, its edges biting into his palm like an accusation. Harlan's squad fanned out, rifles sweeping the gloom, while Elara's vines slithered ahead, coiling around loose boulders to probe for weakness. Lirael staggered slightly, her hand pressed to her side where earlier lightning backlash had scorched fabric and skin, but she waved off aid with a sharp gesture, conjuring a gentle breeze to urge them onward. A low rumble vibrated through the floor, dislodging pebbles that skittered like fleeing insects. Terry surveyed the walls—cracks spiderwebbing wider, black ichor bubbling from fissures with a sizzle like fat on a griddle. He assessed tactics: veer right into a side passage where the air buzzed with charged particles, static prickling his skin, chancing cave-in, or forge straight, peril of exposure to whatever pseudopods might lash from the main flow. The enforcers' boots echoed behind, too close; straight it was, but he'd conjure a hasty barrier to blunt any sprays. "Veins incoming," he bellowed, gauntlet buzzing as he projected a kinetic barrier—a shimmering dome of force that flexed like taut membrane. The first gush erupted moments later: a geyser of oily sludge arced from a seam, bombarding the barrier with eating acid that twisted its borders, acrid steam rising in curls. Elara countered, her fingers knotting in a weave that thrust roots up from the ground, skewering the pseudopod and hauling it down into the fissure with a fleshy rip. Farther below, the air grew dense, laced with phantom scents—rotting fruit where none grew, metallic tang of unshed blood. One squad member, Reyes, clutched his helmet, eyes bulging as he flailed

at phantoms. “They’re here—flanking!” His rifle chattered, bullets ricocheting off walls in harmless sparks. Delusions seized him: mirages of reptilian skins creeping from darkness, the sting of phantom talons scoring his flesh. He crumpled to one knee, vomiting as sickness folded him, legs giving way on the jagged rock. Lirael whirled, palm out, conjuring a gale that knocked him straight without contact, dispersing the phantom horde like fog. “Shake it off—battle the tangible!” Her voice sliced keen, but her free hand quivered, revealing the burden of dual effort. They forged ahead, the tunnel constricting to a crawlspace where they inched on bellies across pulsating veins that trembled beneath them, sizzling in defiance. Terry’s thoughts whirled back to the logs—his father’s scrawled notes, equating old runes to “primitive crutches,” just as Terry had dismissed Elara’s vine-weaves as unreliable whims. The parallel chewed, a twist in his belly, but he buried it; hubris could pause, endurance wouldn’t. A cluster of crystalline scuttlers skittered into view ahead, their shard-bodies glinting like broken glass, legs clicking in frantic rhythm as they swarmed a junction. “Flank and burst,” Terry ordered, rolling into a crouch. He eyed the left wall’s overhang—shelter, yet prone to shatter from plasma reflux—or bare the middle for an open strike, gambling on a rush. Hazard the middle; pressing aim: scour the route swiftly. His gauntlet buzzed, firing piercing superheated plasma in dual jets that atomized the front scuttlers, fragments bursting into sparkling powder that bit bare flesh. Elara flanked left, bow drawn, arrows tipped with thorn-growths that bloomed on impact, ensnaring clusters in writhing nets of bark and fiber. One scuttler broke loose, pouncing at her; she twisted aside, vine-lash snapping to smash its heart to dust. Harlan’s squad unleashed barrages, slugs infused with tempest-threads from Lirael’s weave—every shot dragging lightning trails that blasted carapace, triggering spasms across the horde. But the scuttlers weren’t alone. From alcoves, spectral projections manifested—hazy outlines of Sundering guardians, towering titans with hammers that solidified mid-swing, stone and ether fusing into tangible blows. One projection lunged at Harlan, its weapon cleaving air with a whoosh that drew real blood from a glancing edge. The instructor dodged, rolling behind a protrusion, then fired point-blank; the projection flickered, but reformed, hammer descending like a guillotine. Lirael met

it head-on, conjuring a torrent of lightning that forked from her fingertips, grounding into the projection's form with crackling fury. The sentinel reeled, fissures webbing its phantom armor, yet it advanced, driving her retreat inch by inch, boots skidding on slime-coated rock. Terry assessed: her storm drained fast against the projection's resilience; he'd amplify. He funneled mana through his gauntlet, converting it to a plasma grid that overlaid her bolts—hybrid streams that seared the projection into dissolving wisps, leaving scorched craters in the wall. Another projection targeted Elara, its form twisting mid-charge into a spear-thrust. She crouched, tendrils bursting to snare it, but the point scraped her shoulder, eliciting a gasp of agony as spectral chill infiltrated, deadening sinew. Reyes, shrugging off his stupor, shielded her with covering shots, rounds gnawing at the fringes until Terry's bolt impaled its center, detonating it in a cascade of vanishing fragments. The skirmish gained them yards, but exhaustion clawed—sweat stung eyes, breaths rasped. Terry pocketed the crystal deeper, its weight a reminder: his father's experiments, those "efficient" weaves, had seeded this nightmare. Syndicate agents had escalated the errors, transforming safeguards into a plague generator. He'd sneered at archaic bindings for years, calling them relics; now they might be the key he'd ignored. A fiercer tremor buckled the tunnel ahead, forcing a halt. Dust sifted from the ceiling, and the burnt-sugar stench thickened, veins throbbing like arteries under skin. Harlan signaled halt, rifle trained on a faint glow filtering from a widened cavern. "Ambush scent—tight formation." They crept forward, weapons primed. The cavern opened into a jagged dome, lit by flickering runes on walls veined with corruption. Elite enforcers waited—towering figures in reinforced plating, visors glowing red, whips coiled like serpents. Five, arrayed in a semicircle, their leader bellowing coordinates into a comm. At the center, a destabilizing breach yawned, edges fraying like torn fabric, oily blackness roiling within. No room for finesse. Terry eyed the left flank—enforcers bunched there, but traversing laid bare a pseudopod basin; right provided shelter from stalactites, though falling chunks threatened to trap them. Right it was; pressing aim: disrupt their circle before the summon. "Elara, bind the casters. Lirael, storms on the breach. Squad, suppress." The enforcers charged, whips cracking with energy lashes that scorched

air. One snared a squad member's arm, charring meat to skeleton amid a wail. Harlan bellowed counterfire, his shots punching through a visor in a spray of hydraulics. Elara unleashed arrows that budded vines in air, trapping two enforcers' legs, hauling them askew into the soil where roots pulverized plating with cracking snaps. Lirael hurled a maelstrom of wind laced with hail, pelting the breach's edge to slow the emergence—chunks of crystallizing corruption shattered under the barrage, but the howl deepened, birthing something enormous. A multi-limbed horror clawed free: titanic, its body a tumorous mass of fused flesh and metal, tentacles writhing with barbed suckers, each limb ending in scything claws that gouged furrows in stone. It bellowed, a sound like grinding gears and tearing meat, slamming a tentacle that upheaved the floor in a spray of rubble. Terry's pulse thundered, but he calculated: the brute's core pulsed at the breach's heart—target that, or it'd overwhelm. He dashed right, kinetic shield absorbing a whip-strike that buckled his arm, pain lancing to his shoulder. Plasma lances fired, coring a limb that flailed, ichor fountaining in arcs that corroded nearby stone to bubbling pits. Elara bound a tentacle with thorny lianas, straining as it thrashed, barbs drawing blood from her palms. "It's pulling—hold the line!" Lirael channeled lightning into the vines, electrifying the bindings; the limb convulsed, severing at the joint in a gout of sizzling fluid. Harlan's squad poured rounds into joints, storm-laced bullets erupting sparks that weakened the hide, but the horror adapted, a new appendage sweeping low to topple Reyes—his cry sliced short as he tumbled into the breach's maw, vanishing with a wet slurp. Tension surged; alliances strained in the chaos, Harlan bellowing orders while Elara shot Terry a glance, her jaw clenched in shared resolve. Terry adapted his weave on the fly—fusing plasma with a scavenged rune from the archive's memory, archaic efficiency boosting output. He slammed his gauntlet down, unleashing a grid of superheated arcs that latticed the breach, cauterizing edges and pinning the brute's core. It reared, claws raking futilely at the barrier, body shuddering as corruption veins burst under the strain. Elara reinforced with a surge of growth, vines threading the grid like rebar, while Lirael's tempest funneled into the heart, bolts hammering until the horror fragmented—limbs dissolving into oily sludge that steamed and hardened into brittle crust.

The breach spasmed, contracting with a thunderclap that hurled them back, ears ringing. Chest heaving, Terry rose, surveyed the enforcers' remnants—two fled into shadows, the armored leader's silhouette vanishing deeper. The chase blazed fiercer now. He nodded to the group, gauntlet recharging with a whir, and they lunged after, boots thudding into the fracturing dark.

The tunnels constricted like veins under pressure, walls slick with oozing Riftblight that hissed on contact with their boots. Terry led the plunge, gauntlet humming as it scanned for structural weak points—fissures spiderwebbing the stone ahead, ready to collapse under a wrong step. Elara flanked him, bow drawn, her free hand trailing fingers along the damp rock; she murmured to unseen roots, coaxing faint glows from embedded fungi to pierce the gloom. Lirael brought up the rear with Harlan's remnants—three squad members now, their rifles slung low, faces smeared with grime and sweat. Harlan gripped his staff tighter, knuckles whitening, as he barked, "Tight formation. No stragglers—those echoes love the flanks." A low rumble vibrated through the floor, and the first vein erupted. Black ichor sprayed from a crack, splattering a squad member's boot; the leather bubbled instantly, fusing to skin in a sizzle of flesh. He stifled a grunt, hacking at the growth with his knife, but Elara was there first—her palm pressed to the wound, green light pulsing as she forced herbal essence into the melt, staunching the corrosion before it spread. "Fan out on veins," she said, voice steady, eyes flicking to Terry's back. "Your scans miss the organic pulse—they hide in the rot." Terry nodded without turning, adjusting his weave to overlay bio-rhythms on the holographic readout. Arrogance prickled; her wild intuition clashed with his precision, but it had saved them twice already. The group pressed on, air thickening with ozone and that cloying burnt-sugar tang. Hallucinatory pitfalls struck next—a squad member's step faltered on solid ground that his eyes swore was a yawning chasm, knees buckling as phantom winds clawed at his gear. He fired wildly, bullets ricocheting off walls in sparks that ignited loose tendrils. Lirael lunged, grabbing his collar and yanking him upright; thunder cracked from her free hand, a gust slamming his face like icy rain, shattering the illusion with raw force. "Eyes on the real threats," she snapped, wiping phantom blood from her brow—her own senses assaulted

by the acrid stink of imagined fire licking her nostrils. They cleared the swarm that followed: crystalline scuttlers, thumb-sized horrors skittering from crevices, their shard-bodies glinting as they latched onto ankles. Terry's kinetic shield expanded in a dome, crushing a wave against the barrier with crunching impacts that showered the tunnel in glittering dust. Elara loosed arrows tipped with entangling sap, pinning clusters to the floor where they writhed, dissolving into fizzing pools that etched grooves into the stone. Harlan's staff ignited, ether flames licking out to incinerate a leaping pack; the heat warped the air, turning scuttler shells to molten droplets that pattered like acid rain. Lirael wove storms into their rifle volleys—bullets trailing electric wakes that detonated on impact, blasting craters into the walls and filling the passage with choking smoke. Deeper, spectral echoes materialized: translucent warriors from the Sundering era, armored in rusted plate that phased through stone. One swung a ghostly axe at Terry, the blade passing harmless but leaving a wake of nausea that doubled him over, stomach churning as if poisoned. He retched bile, then fired a plasma lance—superheated bolt coring the echo's chest, the figure solidifying in a scream before shattering into evaporating mist that left frost-rimed patches on the ground. "They're projections—hit to disrupt!" Harlan roared, his staff slamming a second echo; ether burst rippled outward, cracking the apparition's shield and hurling it back into the wall, where it smeared like wet ink. The archive chamber yawned sudden on their left—a concealed alcove, its door half-melted by blight. Terry halted the group with a raised fist, scanning the threshold. Inside, consoles flickered with archived holos, data slates stacked amid corroded servers. He stepped in, gauntlet interfacing with a terminal; files bloomed in his visor—logs from his father, Dr. Elias Prince, detailing early Nexus-weaves that bridged rifts without the "crude bindings of old arcana." One entry chilled: *The blight isn't chaos; it's malleable. Weaponize the mutation, control the multiverse.* Terry's jaw tightened, fingers hovering over the controls. His dismissal of archaic methods? Echoes of Elias's hubris, the very flaw that birthed this syndicate nightmare. Elara peered over his shoulder, her breath catching as she traced a rune-etched diagram. "He wove too tight—ignored the living flow." She tapped the slate, pulling a sub-file on enforcer protocols, her gesture sharp, reveal-

ing her doubt in Terry's inherited precision without a word of pity. Lirael scanned the chamber's edges, storm energy coiling in her palms. "Strategy's sound, but we're exposed here. Pull what you need and move—echoes don't wait." Harlan grunted agreement, posting a lookout. "Boy's legacy or not, we use it. Now." They downloaded the essentials—blueprints for blight amplifiers, syndicate codes—and bolted, the chamber sealing behind with a grind of failing mechanisms. But the pursuit twisted into ambush swift. The tunnel widened into a cavernous vault, stalactites dripping ichor from ceiling veins. Shadows stirred: elite enforcers, six in powered exosuits etched with glowing runes, blocking the far exit. Their leader—the armored silhouette from before—stood central, gauntlets raised to an obelisk-like ritual node pulsing purple ooze. "End of the line, Prince heir," the leader's voice modulator boomed, distorted. "Your bloodline's folly awakens true power." Enforcers charged, exosuits whining as they unleashed barrages—rift-infused rounds that warped air, exploding on impact to spawn barbed tendrils from the floor. One clipped Harlan's shoulder, the blast hurling him against a wall; stone cracked under his weight, shoulder plate denting as he rose, staff flaring to cauterize the sprouting barbs. Terry's shield buckled under a follow-up volley, kinetic field shattering in a web of sparks that scorched his sleeves. He rolled, firing back—plasma grid deploying to slice an enforcer's leg servos, metal melting in rivulets that pooled and hardened into glassy spikes. Elara dodged low, vines erupting from her quiver to snare an enforcer's arm; the suit strained, hydraulics groaning as thorns pierced plating, oil mixing with sap in corrosive drips that ate through joints. "Flank the obelisk—cut the summon!" she called, loosing an arrow that embedded in a chest plate, blooming into entangling roots that locked the figure in place. Lirael summoned a gale, wind howling through the vault to deflect rounds; bullets veered, slamming into stalactites that rained shards like shrapnel, gashing a squad member's cheek. She pressed forward, lightning arcing from her bowstring to ground an enforcer—electric surge traveling up the suit, plating glowing cherry-red before bursting in a shower of molten fragments that pelted the ground. Harlan's squad returned fire, storm-laced rounds punching craters into exosuits; one enforcer staggered, visor cracking as a bullet detonated inside, faceplate ejecting in a spray of blood and sparks.

But the leader activated the node—obelisk thrumming, purple ooze surging into a widening rift at the vault's heart. Reality tore with a screech, birthing the colossus: a multi-limbed behemoth, hulking frame of fused flesh and crystal, towers of muscle rippling under shard-plated hide. Eight appendages lashed out—two crushing, two whipping with venom barbs, others ending in maws that gnashed with crystalline teeth. It lumbered forward, footfalls quaking the cavern, floor buckling into fissures that swallowed debris. The colossus swept a crushing limb; Terry dove, the impact pulverizing a stalagmite into dust clouds that choked the air. He recalibrated mid-roll, fusing archive runes into his gauntlet—archaic patterns amplifying plasma output, turning lances into searing beams that gouged furrows across the beast's flank, charring meat to crisped layers that sloughed off in steaming slabs. Elara bound a whipping tendril, lianas coiling thick as cables; the colossus thrashed, barbs raking stone into gravel sprays, but her vines held, thorns drawing black ichor that sizzled on contact. Lirael funneled tempest into the bindings, bolts chaining along the length; the limb spasmed, joints popping with wet cracks as electricity arced to the core, hide blistering in popped vesicles. Harlan bellowed, "Concentrate the heart—squad, suppress the limbs!" His ether staff lashed out, flames engulfing a maw-appendage; the jaws clamped on nothing but fire, teeth melting into slag that dripped like wax, scorching the floor into blackened craters. An enforcer broke through, gauntlet slamming Terry's shield—force rippling through, jarring his bones as the field flickered. He countered with a point-blank plasma burst, coring the suit's torso; armor vented steam and sparks, the figure crumpling in a heap of twitching servos. But the colossus adapted, crystal shards regrowing over wounds, a barbed tail lashing to topple Lirael—her wind-gust barely deflecting it, the tip grazing her side, tearing cloth and drawing a line of blood that burned like acid. Alliances frayed in the frenzy: a squad member hesitated, eyes glazing from a hallucinatory assault—enforcer rounds blooming illusory flames that made him claw at his skin, nails drawing real blood. Elara yanked him clear, her glance at Terry sharp—doubt in his evolving weave, shown in the way she gripped her bow tighter, as if ready to abandon tech for pure wild force. Terry pushed through, mastery sharpening; he wove the father's logs into a hybrid seal—plasma

grid laced with runic vines, slamming down over the rift. The colossus reared, claws rending the barrier, gashes spraying etheric backlash that singed brows. Elara reinforced with growth surges, roots threading the grid, anchoring it deep into stone. Lirael's lightning hammered the core, bolts exploding veins in geysers of fluid that corroded the air. The beast fragmented under the assault—limbs shearing in cascades of sludge, body collapsing into the contracting rift with a roar that shook dust from the ceiling. Enforcers fell back, two vaporized in the backlash, the leader's form blurring into escape. The group panted, wounds throbbing, but Terry's gauntlet whirred, recharging for the press onward. A fresh tremor rattled the vault. From the obelisk's base, new veins pulsed—thicker, hungrier.

Chapter 6: Echoes of the Sundering

The dim glow of emergency lumens stuttered across the jagged fissures in the underbelly walls, casting elongated shadows that writhed like predators in the haze. Terry Prince gripped the data slate tighter, his knuckles blanching as he trotted beside Elara and Lirael, Harlan's squad fanning out behind them in a ragged formation. Blood trickled from a gash on Lirael's arm, staining her sleeve, while Elara's limp worsened with each step, her boot scraping against the uneven stone slick with residual ichor. The air buzzed with the low vibration of distant collapses, the academy's foundations groaning like a brute in its death throes. "Keep moving," Harlan bellowed, his voice a gravelly command that sliced through the squad's gulped air. He adjusted the strap of his pulse rifle, darting a look at the slate in Terry's hand. "That thing better be worth the detour, kid. We're not outrunning those corruption veins forever." Terry brushed off the taunt, his fingers flying over the slate's interface. Holographic emitters whirred to life, projecting a cascade of azure light that illuminated the tunnel's claustrophobic confines. Grainy archives scrolled out before them—logs from decades past, timestamped to the Sundering's eve. "It's not just data," he mumbled, gaze sharpening. "It's proof." The projection stabilized into a sprawling vista: continents fracturing like brittle glass under an onslaught of iridescent breaches in the sky. Shimmering black ooze—corruption

in its raw fury—erupted from those gashes, tendrils lashing out to devour coastlines. Cities crumbled, spires melting into grotesque amalgamations of steel and sinew, while screams reverberated faintly from the audio feed. Then, a figure manifested in the hologram's foreground: a man in a lab coat, his face obscured by static, but the voice unmistakable—Terry's father, Dr. Elias Prince. "We can harness it," the recording boomed, overlaid with the roar of tearing earth. "Nexus-weaving will bind the breaches, convert the chaos into power. The archaic weaves only fracture; precision will stabilize." The feed shifted to schematics: runic arrays intertwined with energy conduits, experiments meant to siphon the corruption's raw force. But the footage deteriorated—arrays overloading, corruption surging unchecked, amplifying the cataclysm into a world-shattering wave. Elara halted mid-stride, her hand pressing against a bulging corruption vein in the wall that pulsed like a heartbeat. She traced its oily surface with a fingertip, then flicked away the residue. "Your father's work... it fed the brute, not tamed it." Her voice held no blame, just a stark fact as she drew her bowstring taut, gaze probing the shadows. Lirael winced, binding a fresh bandage around her wound with one hand while the other crackled with latent static. "And now that armored bastard wants to escalate to catastrophe. Multiversal scale? We're not sealing minor breaches anymore." She shot Terry a sidelong look, her jaw clenched, before releasing a spark that arced harmlessly into the air—a test of her reserves. The holograms stuttered erratically, the azure light warping into sickly green corruption veins that bled into reality. Spectral projections coalesced from the projections, their forms translucent at first, then solidifying into towering silhouettes clad in fractured armor etched with glowing runes. The air stung with ozone, mingled with an acrid tang of scorched circuitry. One projection lunged, its blade—a jagged shard of crystallized corruption—slicing toward Harlan's flank. "Contact!" Harlan bellowed, pivoting to fire a burst from his rifle. Kinetic rounds slammed into the projection's chest, shattering plates of ethereal metal that dissolved into swirling motes, but the projection forged ahead, its form knitting back with threads of oily corruption. Terry reacted instinctively, slapping his palm against the slate's override. A plasma grid erupted from his gauntlet, azure filaments snapping outward like whips. They lashed the

projection's legs, superheating the air with a sizzle that turned the stone floor to bubbling slag, pocking the floor where the grid impacted. The projection reeled, its lower half melting into a puddle of viscous black corruption that steamed and popped. Elara synchronized seamlessly, her fingers weaving through the air as if plucking ethereal strings. Thorny vines burst from the tunnel walls, roots cracking stone as they lunged forward, coiling around another projection's torso. The tendrils constricted with a wet snap, thorns piercing armor and drawing forth gouts of inky fluid that sizzled on contact. The projection flailed, its blade gouging grooves in the vines, but Elara flicked her wrist, and the growths clamped, pulverizing bone-like structures into fragments that rained down like brittle hail. Lightning arced from Lirael's outstretched hand, a branching torrent that forked through the air, ionizing it with a thunderclap that rattled loose pebbles from the ceiling. It struck a third projection square in the helm, the impact shattering the helm in a spray of molten shards that lodged in the wall, glowing incandescent before cooling to jagged spikes. The body seized, electrical arcs crawling across its frame, charring flesh that smelled of burnt-sugar stench. Harlan's squad unleashed, their rifles crackling in disciplined volleys. Slugs pierced pulsating breach anomalies—bulbous sacs that had swollen from the hologram's edges, leaking corruption that corroded the floor into pitted craters. One soldier, a wiry woman named Reyes, knelt and fired a grenade from her underbarrel launcher; the blast tore the anomaly apart in a wet rupture, sending globs of corruption splattering against shields that buzzed with kinetic deflection, sizzling as they neutralized the ooze. But the projections adapted. A projection's strike nicked Terry's shoulder, the blade's edge leaving a line of freezing numbness that spread like frostbite, forcing him to his knees. Hallucinations bombarded him—visions of allies twisting into snarling mutants, Elara's face elongating into fangs, the tunnel filling with phantom smoke that clawed at his throat, triggering a hack that bent him double. He cleared his head, retching bile, and countered with a kinetic shield that expanded from his bracer, slamming the projection back into the wall with a crunch that embedded its form in cracking masonry. "Flank them—don't bunch up!" Harlan bellowed, his boot grinding a reforming tendril into pulp. He nodded toward Terry, a nod of respect escaping as he reloaded.

"Your grid's holding the line. Keep it woven tight." Forging ahead, the group shattered the last projection with a combined assault: vines ensnaring its arms, lightning lancing through its chest in an explosive vent of superheated gas, plasma cauterizing the remnants into inert ash. Amid the debris, the slate pinged—a fragmented log surfacing. The armored leader's voice, distorted but clear: "Replicate the Prince experiments. Sundering wasn't failure; it was prototype. Multiversal breaches will birth our new order." The corner of Terry's mouth twitched in a tight smirk, pocketing the slate as tremors mounted, the ground lurching like a living thing. "He's chasing ghosts. We end this before he summons more." Farther below, a burgeoning projection-breach yawned at the tunnel's end—a churning maelstrom of distorted space, pulling at debris with vacuum force, edges fraying into crystalline corruption barbs. Multiversal projections rippled from it, shockwaves warping the air into rippling heat haze that bent light and tugged at their clothing. "Seal it now," Elara urged, nocking an arrow infused with verdant glow. She loosed it into the breach's heart, the projectile blooming into entangling roots that anchored the edges, stone grinding as they took hold. Lirael channeled a stormweave, winds howling as they funneled into the breach, lightning threading the maelstrom like veins of fire. The air crackled, ozone thick enough to taste, and the breach's pull reversed, sucking in its own barbs with an implosive whoosh that showered them in pulverized rock. Terry layered his plasma grid over the weave, filaments fusing with the roots in a lattice of searing blue. The breach collapsed with a thunderous implosion, the shockwave hurling them back, cratering the floor in a web of fissures. But victory rang hollow fast—the seal's energy pulse reverberated, awakening Sundering remnants from the walls. Chitinous crawlers erupted in swarms, their crystalline legs skittering across the stone, mandibles clicking with hunger. Feline shadows detached from the gloom, multiplying into delirious duplicates that pounced with heat mirages distorting their forms. Harlan's squad formed a firing line, rounds chewing through the front ranks, carapaces shattering into shards that sliced the air like shrapnel. One crawler latched onto Reyes' leg, its barbs injecting fluid that blistered her skin red; she bashed it free with her rifle butt, the impact caving its shell. From a side passage, shouts reverberated—academy survivors, ragged students and

staff in makeshift armor, wielding scavenged wands and blades. A burly instructor led them, his face scarred, bellowing, “We’ve got your back—push through the swarm!” Elara surveyed the newcomers, her vine lash whipping out to snare a shadow duplicate, thorns shredding the illusion into dissipating mist. “They know the tunnels. Link up—circle the breach site.” The alliance formed in the chaos, survivors’ arcane bursts—flares of raw mana that scorched crawler hides—meshing with the squad’s disciplined fire. Terry raised his gauntlet, plasma piercing toward the swarm’s core, as a fresh tremor fractured the floor wide.

The floor fractured with a guttural bellow, jagged fissures spiderwebbing outward like veins of fractured obsidian, swallowing chunks of debris into yawning chasms. Terry’s gauntlet buzzed to life, superheated plasma piercing forth in a searing arc that bisected a cluster of chitinous crawlers mid-leap. The beam vaporized their crystalline exoskeletons, leaving behind steaming craters that bubbled with acrid residue, the stench of charred chitin mingling with the metallic tang of ozone. Fragments of their shattered limbs pelted the survivors like hail, one grazing Harlan’s shoulder and drawing a thin line of blood that soaked into his tactical vest. “Flank left—keep those duplicates off the kids!” the burly instructor bellowed, his scarred face twisting as he swung a scavenged mana-blade in a wide arc. The weapon buzzed with unstable energy, cleaving through a feline shadow that dissolved into wisps of heat-distorted air, its illusory claws raking empty space before vanishing. His group—five students clutching improvised wands that sputtered erratic bursts of force—fanned out, their flares punching holes in the swarm, scorching crawler hides into blackened husks that twitched and curled. Elara pivoted, her boots scraping against the uneven stone as she unleashed a coil of thorny vines from her palm. The growths erupted from the floor’s cracks, lashing out to ensnare a pair of duplicates that mirrored a student’s panicked lunge. Thorns pierced the mirages, roots grinding through their insubstantial forms until they frayed into harmless vapor, but not before one illusion’s fading tail whipped across her arm, leaving welts that burned like fresh brands. She glanced at the instructor, nodding curtly. “Your lot holds the line here— we’ll punch the core.” Harlan’s squad adjusted without a word, Reyes limping

but steady as she pumped rounds from her stormweave rifle into the swarm's edge. Each shot cracked like thunder, bolts laced with electric discharge that arced between crawlers, fusing their legs into molten slag that pooled and sizzled on the stone. Lirael, her hair matted with sweat and grime, raised both hands; a gale howled from her core, whipping dust into a blinding maelstrom that hurled a feline shadow into a wall. The impact crumpled its form against the rock, the illusion shattering like glass under pressure, fragments scattering with a tinkling echo. Terry forged ahead, gauntlet whirring as he overlaid a kinetic pulse. The wave rippled outward, slamming into the swarm's heart and crumpling crawlers into crumpled heaps, their mandibles snapping futilely against the invisible barrier before shells imploded under the force. But the tremor intensified, the ground lurching like a living thing, forcing him to stagger. A fissure yawned beneath a student, swallowing his leg up to the knee in grinding rubble; the instructor hauled him free with a grunt, muscles straining against the shifting stone. "Pull back—tunnels ahead are caving!" Harlan bellowed, his voice slicing through the din as he fired a suppressive burst that chewed a path clear. The alliance retreated in tandem, survivors weaving arcane shields—translucent barriers that shimmered and cracked under crawler assaults—while the squad covered their rear. Elara's vines retracted into the walls, sealing off a side passage where duplicates slunk, the growths crushing stone into dust that clogged the gap. They spilled into a narrower corridor, the air thicker here, laced with the burnt-sugar stench of corruption. Lirael sealed the entrance with a surge of stormweave, winds compressing the air into a howling plug that battered incoming crawlers back, their bodies piling against it in a writhing mass until the pressure crushed them into pulp that oozed through cracks. Terry slumped against the wall, breath ragged, his gauntlet cooling with a faint sizzle. Wounds throbbed— a gash on his forearm from shrapnel, Lirael's earlier electrocution leaving her movements jerky, and Reyes binding a blistered leg with a torn strip of cloth. The burly instructor—Kael, as he introduced himself with a terse nod—gestured to a cluster of consoles half-buried in the corridor's debris. "Archives from the old vaults. We scavenged what we could before the underbelly went mad." His squad and the survivors formed a loose perimeter, gaze probing the gloom for

threats, while Terry pulled the data slate from his pouch. Its screen flickered to life under his touch, holographic interfaces blooming in the dim light. “Run the logs,” Terry said, fingers dancing over the slate’s runes. The device whirred, projecting a cascade of visuals into the air—grainy feeds of shattered skylines, continents fracturing like eggshells under invisible strain. Projections of the Sundering replayed in stark detail: oily black corruption seeping from breaches in reality, corroding spires into twisted amalgamations of metal and flesh, the ground heaving as anomalies pulsed like infected wounds. A figure materialized in the hologram, cloaked in lab garb, his face obscured but voice clear—Terry’s father, intoning calculations for a Nexus-weave experiment meant to stabilize breaches. “Containment breach imminent. The weave amplifies rather than binds—evacuate sector seven.” Elara leaned in, her fingers tightening on her bowstring as the projection shifted to catastrophic fallout: corruption birthing abominations from the earth, their forms mutating in real-time, limbs elongating into barbed scythes that reaped through fleeing crowds. The visions carried a tangible weight, the air buzzing with residual energy that made skin prickle, as if the projections bled into the present. Lirael’s jaw clenched, a subtle tremor in her stance betraying her focus; she murmured, “That weave pattern—it’s echoing the leader’s ritual. He’s not just breaching; he’s scaling it.” The holograms destabilized without warning, static rippling as ethereal forms coalesced from the light. Spectral warriors manifested into solidity, their armor etched with ancient runes that glowed like embers, blades materializing from vapor into edges sharp enough to slice stone. One lunged, its sword cleaving a console in half with a shower of sparks and molten circuits, the severed metal dripping like wax. Pulsating corruption anomalies followed, bulbous orbs of oily corruption hovering, tendrils lashing out to probe the air. “They’re solidifying—disrupt the projections!” Terry snapped, gauntlet flaring as he unleashed a plasma grid. Filaments wove a net of blue fire that ensnared a warrior mid-stride, the heat melting runes into slag that bubbled and popped, the figure dissolving in a burst of steam that scalded nearby survivors. Kael swung his mana-blade, parrying a tendril that whipped toward a student’s throat; the clash sent vibrations up his arm, the appendage recoiling with a spray of viscous fluid that sizzled on the floor, etching pits into

the stone. Elara countered an anomaly, her arrow blooming into a spray of entangling roots upon impact. The growths wrapped the orb, thorns piercing its membrane with wet punctures, corruption leaking out in rivulets that withered the vines even as they squeezed, the orb imploding in a geyser of black ichor that splashed across the wall, staining it with pulsating veins. One droplet struck a survivor's hand, skin blistering into raw, weeping sores; he hissed, shaking it off, but pressed on, wand flaring to blast a warrior's leg, the force shearing bone-like armor into fragments that clattered like broken pottery. Lirael conjured a lightning surge, arcs forking from her fingertips to chain through two specters. The bolts seared through ethereal flesh, charring it to crisped husks that crumbled, the discharge grounding out in the floor with cracks that widened fissures, sending tremors racing up legs. Harlan's squad volleyed in sync, stormweave rounds punching through anomalies, each hit erupting the orbs into cascades of shards that embedded in walls like shrapnel, one grazing Reyes' cheek and drawing blood that she wiped away with a gauntleted thumb. "Tighten the grid—don't let 'em flank," she growled, her stance widening to cover Elara's side, rifle barking another burst that vaporized a tendril inches from the forest guardian's back. Amid the fray, the slate's logs fragmented further, audio snippets crackling: "...syndicate protocols active. Replicate Sundering cascade—multiversal amplification viable if nexus aligned." Terry's gaze sharpened, a flicker of recognition tightening his grip on the device as he dodged a warrior's overhead swing, the blade embedding in the floor with a resonant thud that vibrated through his boots. The armored leader's plan crystallized in those words—not mere chaos, but a deliberate projection, weaponizing the cataclysm to shatter barriers across realities. Forging onward, the group funneled into a widening chamber, the holograms pursuing like vengeful ghosts. Tremors escalated, ceiling chunks plummeting in dusty cascades that forced evasive rolls, dust clogging throats and eyes. A burgeoning projection-breach yawned in the chamber's center, its edges fraying with oily threads that tugged at clothing like grasping fingers. Terry layered his plasma over Elara's anchoring vines, the fusion cauterizing the tear with a sizzle of superheated steam, while Lirael's winds funneled the anomaly inward, lightning threading the collapse until it sealed with a concussive boom,

shockwaves cratering the ground and hurling spectral remnants into walls where they shattered like brittle ice. But the seal's resonance stirred deeper threats. From alcoves, awakened Sundering remnants stirred—towering brutes with flesh-metal hides, their bellows echoing as they charged, fists pounding craters into the stone. The alliance braced, Kael bellowing orders to his students while Harlan's squad reloaded with mechanical clicks. Elara nocked another arrow, her gaze flicking to Terry with a sharp incline of her head—affirmation of the push forward—as a brute's claw raked the air, gouging sparks from a console.

The brute's claw retracted, sparks flickering like fireflies before vanishing against the chamber's damp stone. Terry pivoted, his fingers flying over the slate's interface, rerouting its power to amplify a plasma grid that buzzed to life overhead. The lattice crackled, blue arcs snapping toward the charging remnant, searing gouges into its hide where metal fused with sinew peeled back in charred flaps. Elara released her arrow, the shaft burrowing into the brute's knee with a wet crunch, thorns blooming from the impact to root it in place as sap-like ichor oozed. "Flank low—pin the legs," she directed, her voice steady as she drew a second arrow, elbow hooking back without a glance at the falling debris that pelted her shoulder. Lirael conjured a gale that whipped dust into stinging veils, her hands clenching as if wringing the air itself. Bolts forked from her palms, hammering the brute's torso in staccato bursts that left smoking craters, the scent of ozone sharpening the burnt-sugar stench of corruption. Harlan's squad fanned out, Reyes crouching to brace her rifle on a jutting ledge, her finger squeezing the trigger in measured pulls that sent rounds spiraling through the air. Each impact bloomed with embedded stormweave, the projectiles detonating inside the remnant's frame and erupting chunks of fused bone outward in ragged sprays. "Suppress the big one—eyes on the flanks," Harlan bellowed from cover behind a toppled pillar, his reload a swift slap of a fresh magazine, the click echoing like a hammer on anvil. Kael, the grizzled instructor with a squad of wide-eyed students huddled behind him, thrust his staff forward. A barrier of woven light shimmered into existence, deflecting a flung chunk of ceiling that shattered against it in a hail of gravel. One student, a lanky boy with corruption-scarred arms, hesitated, his knuckles

blanching on his conduit glove. “We hold the line here—channel through me,” Kael ordered, his jaw clenched as he glanced at Terry, a curt nod conveying his stake in the weave’s precision over wild surges. The brute toppled with a guttural bellow, its bulk slamming the floor and sending fissures spiderwebbing outward. But the chamber stirred anew. From the slate in Terry’s grip, the archived logs pulsed brighter, holographic tendrils uncoiling like smoke from a bellows. Visions erupted unbidden: continents fracturing under azure skies, landmasses shearing apart in slow, grinding breaches that spewed oily blackness across oceans. The air thickened with the playback, a low rumble syncing with the academy’s tremors, as if the underbelly itself replayed the cataclysm. Terry’s breath caught, his thumb freezing mid-swipe as a figure materialized in the projection—his father, gaunt and wild-eyed, hunched over a nexus console amid sparking pipes. “Stabilization failing—corruption amplification unintended,” the hologram rasped, voice distorting like gravel under boots. “Experiments pushed too far… the weave can’t contain it.” Elara’s emerald gaze sharpened, her free hand pressing against a vein of corruption snaking up the wall, fingers curling as if testing its pulse. The holograms warped, edges bleeding into solidity. Projection warriors coalesced from the light, their forms flickering before hardening into translucent armor etched with glowing runes, blades manifesting as tangible weight that cleaved the air with whooshes. One lunged at Lirael, its edge grazing her arm and drawing a line of blood that sizzled on contact. She staggered, knees buckling under a wave of vertigo that twisted her vision—hallways morphing into churning voids, the scent of scorched earth flooding her nostrils despite the chamber’s chill. “It’s burrowing in,” she hissed through gritted teeth, shaking her head to dispel the onslaught, her stance shifting to anchor against the illusion’s pull. Reyes fired a burst that punched through a warrior’s chest, the round exiting in a spray of ethereal mist that solidified into hardening frost on the ground, slicking the stone and forcing the squad to skid for footing. “These ghosts pack a wallop—aim for the cores,” she called, her boot scraping for purchase as she advanced, rifle sweeping to cover a student’s flank. The boy nodded sharply, his conduit flaring to hurl a kinetic pulse that bowled a projection figure into a wall, where it embedded with a crack like splitting timber. Terry integrated the slate’s

data into his nexus implant, veins of code threading his vision. His father's logs unveiled the truth: those experiments hadn't just failed—they'd fed the Sundering, twisting containment fields into amplifiers that birthed the corruption's voracious spread. The armored leader's syndicate aimed higher, not containment but replication, scaling the cataclysm across veils to fracture multiversal nexuses. "He's not breaking Earth—he's chaining it to the breaches," Terry muttered, his jaw clenched as he unleashed a plasma lance that bisected a pulsating anomaly—a bulbous orb of corruption hovering like a storm cloud, its surface rippling with internal lightning. The beam vaporized it in a burst of steam, acidic droplets sizzling against the floor and etching pits that steamed. Tremors intensified, the chamber's walls groaning as cracks birthed grasping roots of corruption, slick and pulsating, that whipped toward the group like flailing tentacles. Elara countered with a sweep of her arm, vines erupting from the earth in thorny coils that ensnared the roots, twisting them taut until they snapped with fibrous pops, releasing spurts of black ichor that burned like acid on contact. One tendril grazed Harlan's leg, searing through his armor and drawing a grunt; he retaliated with a rifle volley that shredded it into twitching segments. "Forge ahead through the east arch—can't hold here forever," he urged, his free hand clapping a student's shoulder to steady the youth's shaking aim. Lirael conjured a surge, winds howling through the chamber to buffet the projection warriors, her fingers splaying as lightning arced in chains that grounded against their forms, shattering limbs into dissipating shards that rained like glass. But the visions pressed, another hologram unfolding: corruption's genesis, oily tendrils erupting from a shattered aetherium core, corroding fleets of airships into twisted wrecks that plummeted into abyssal chasms. The air grew heavy, laced with phantom smoke that clawed at throats, forcing coughs and squinted eyes. Kael's students formed a hasty perimeter, their conduits linking in a flickering chain that repelled a warrior's charge, the impact reverberating up their arms like a struck gong. "Weave tighter—don't let the projections bleed," Kael commanded, his staff slamming the ground to anchor the barrier, sweat beading on his brow as a crack widened beneath him, forcing a sideways leap. The group funneled toward the east arch, boots crunching over debris—shattered consoles, embed-

ded shards, and the husks of felled remnants. A burgeoning projection-breach yawned ahead, its maw fraying with threads that tugged at gear, pulling Reyes' rifle strap taut until she severed it with a knife slash. Terry orchestrated the seal, plasma grids interlocking with Elara's binding vines, the fusion igniting in a web of searing light that contracted the breach's edges with sizzling contractions. Lirael's lightning threaded the core, surges pounding inward until the tear imploded in a vacuum rush, the backlash hurling everyone against walls in a tumble of limbs and grunts. Silence fractured. From shadowed alcoves, the seal's projection roused a swarm—Sundering remnants awakening in droves, towering forms with jagged hides shambling forward, their footfalls quaking the stone. Claws scraped, bellows rising in a cacophony that vibrated ribs. Harlan's squad pivoted, rifles crackling in disciplined fire that carved furrows into the lead brute's chest, ichor spraying in arcs. Elara unleashed arrows in rapid succession, each embedding and blooming to trip the advance, her breath steady despite the press. "We need numbers—fall back to the survivors," she said, her chin lifting toward Kael's group, who braced with raised conduits. Lirael funneled a gale that scattered the front line, buying space as her hand wiped blood from her lip, the metallic tang mixing with the corruption's reek. Terry glimpsed more holograms flickering on the slate—Veil Concord manifests, glyphs fracturing like broken quartz, hinting at Crysthaven's chimes reverberating through the breaches. The leader's replication plot tied deeper, weaponizing projections to summon multiversal cascades. The swarm closed, a wall of muscle and metal. Kael bellowed, "Link with us—combined fire on the breach point!" His students surged forward, conduits flaring in unison. Terry nodded, plasma charging as the alliance formed, rifles and weaves converging in a barrage that lit the chamber like a forge. A remnant's charge broke through, its fist cratering the ground near Elara, forcing her roll aside into a crouch. She rose firing, arrow piercing an eye socket with a squelch. Deeper tremors shook loose a ceiling slab, crashing down to bisect the swarm and spray dust that choked the air. The group forged ahead into the alliance's fold, Harlan's squad integrating with Kael's line, shots and surges merging in a thunderous rhythm. Reyes glanced at a student fumbling his reload, her hand steadying his with a firm grip. "Breathe—squeeze, don't jerk." The boy

fired true, round embedding in a brute's thigh with a crunch. Through the chaos, Terry clutched the slate, its warnings pulsing: the leader fled toward the core vaults, projections amplifying his ritual. The underbelly fractured further, paths narrowing into treacherous squeezes where corruption veins pulsed like veins in a titanic heart, forcing crawls over slick rubble and dodges from falling spars. Lirael's winds cleared a path, gusts shoving aside a toppled beam that blocked the way, splinters flying like needles. They emerged into a wider vault, remnants harrying their heels, but unexpected voices echoed—more academy survivors, ragged figures emerging from side tunnels with makeshift weapons. A woman with a bandaged arm hefted a conduit rod, her eyes locking on Harlan. "Instructor—we've held the lower seals. Join or die scattered." Her gesture swept toward a barricade of fused metal and stone, where figures manned positions, firing into the swarm's flank. The alliance swelled, a desperate knot against the encroaching tide. Terry wove his grid higher, arcs leaping to ignite a remnant's hide in blistering flames. Elara's vines lashed out, coiling around legs to yank brutes off balance into waiting rifle fire. Lirael's storm brewed overhead, rain-like sparks pattering down to shock the ground wet. A titanus among the remnants reared, its form a twisted fusion of stone and corruption, fists pounding craters that swallowed debris. The group scattered, boots slipping on fractured tile as it swung, the whoosh displacing air in a gale. Kael thrust his staff, channeling a pulse that staggered it, while Reyes' squad poured rounds into joints, sparks flying from stressed metal. "Target the seams—crack it open," she urged, her reload a blur as she ducked a flung rock that pulverized a pillar behind her.

The titanic brute bellowed, a guttural bellow that rumbled through the vault's stone, sending cracks splintering across the floor. Terry's fingers flew over his gauntlet, channeling a plasma lance that pierced the brute's elbow joint with a sizzle of vaporizing stone. The limb buckled, spraying shards that clattered like broken teeth. Elara flicked her wrist, conjuring roots that burst from a cracked tile, snaring the brute's ankle and yanking it sideways into a rifle barrage. Bullets from Reyes' squad tore through the corruption-laced hide, revealing throbbing veins that oozed oily black ichor, the reek of ozone and burnt-sugar stench

thickening the air. Lirael clenched her jaw, gaze sharpening as she unleashed a lightning surge that forked into the titanic brute's chest, charring flesh until it split open in a wet crackle. The brute toppled, its collapse shuddering the ground and crashing a loose stalactite that pinned a remnant's leg beneath its weight. Harlan's squad—Reyes bellowing orders, her shoulders squared despite the gash leaking blood down her arm—pushed forward in compact ranks, barrels flaring to dispatch the laggards. Kael, the survivor woman's companion, a wiry engineer with grease-streaked goggles perched on his brow, dipped his head sharply at Terry. "That grid of yours—solid work. But save the juice. We've got projections stirring in the archives ahead." The vault's chaos faded to gasping breaths and the drip of settling corruption. Terry swiped sweat from his brow, his gauntlet buzzing faintly as it cooled. He eyed the data slate in his grip, its crystal facets still warm from the download. Elara knelt beside Lirael, who clutched her side where a stray strike had bruised ribs, every breath pulling a sharp grimace. "Hold still," Elara whispered, her fingers pressing a poultice of crushed herbs onto the injury, the scent of mint slicing through the reeking fog. Lirael's response was a tight nod, her clasp on her staff firm. "Archives?" Terry echoed, striding past a slain remnant whose form dissolved into crystalline sludge, simmering with soft bursts. The alliance—now a dozen strong, survivors clutching conduit rods and jury-rigged blasters—circled loosely. Kael tilted his head toward a shadowed alcove, where pipes coiled into a reinforced door, half-open from the quakes. "Lower seals held, but the slate you pulled? It's keyed to the old nexus. Plug it in, and we might get eyes on what the leader's unleashing." Harlan, limping from a twisted ankle but refusing aid, slapped Terry's shoulder. "Do it. We've bought time, but those veins—" He pointed to the walls, where black tendrils writhed like exposed arteries, freezing sections of rock into spiked growths that rasped softly against the air. "They're nourishing something vaster." Terry interfaced the slate with a flickering console, his runic code linking smoothly. The device buzzed, projecting a holographic cascade that bloomed like frost on glass. Images unfolded: continents fracturing under azure skies turned stormy, breaches gaping to vomit the initial surges of corruption. Glistening sludge poured over woodlands, twisting trees into veined monstrosities, their peeling skin merging with

steel thorns that shone eerily. Cities crumbled as the corruption seeped into foundations, pavements warping into meaty crests that throbbed with hijacked vitality. A figure manifested in the hologram—tall, bespectacled, his fingers tangling corrupted nexus strands. Terry's breath caught; the face was his father's, carved with despair in the turmoil. Logs decrypted in bursts: "Experiment 47—mana conversion unstable. Corruption amplification unintended. Sundering inevitable. Must contain..." The hologram flickered, revealing notes on failed seals, how the disaster's remnants lurked in the depths, set for revival. Elara's gaze widened, her vines coiling back into her sleeves with a gentle whisper. "Your father... he tried to stop it?" Her tone carried no blame, just the burden of mutual sorrow, fingers curling around her bowstring. Lirael leaned forward, disregarding the pain in her flank. "Tried and failed. Look—these logs tie to the leader's ritual. He's not just breaching; he's amplifying it. Multiversal anchors, pulling projections from shattered worlds." The holograms flickered, hues seeping into tangibility. Ghostly fighters solidified from the glow—ethereal forms clad in archaic armor, blades manifesting as they rushed with war cries that reverberated like cracking thunder. Behind them, breach anomalies throbbed: churning abysses rimmed with crystalline edges, spawning whips that struck, eroding the atmosphere with bitter vapors. "They're real—move!" Kael bellowed, thrusting his staff to raise a shield of buzzing force that deflected the first blade swing, the shock numbing his arms till they shook. Terry's plasma grid ignited, bolts crashing into a ghost's torso and erupting in a fountain of ionized sparks, the fighter dissolving into wisps that reformed nearby. Elara unleashed arrows tipped with entangling thorns, shafts lodging in anomalies to sprout vines that choked the abysses, compressing till they spurted dark liquid that sizzled on the floor. Lirael's lightning surged in jagged bolts, striking a fighter's helm and flinging it rearward to smash into a bulkhead, the shape's body spasming as current crawled over its appendages, charring phantom flesh. Reyes' squad took positions in a shoot line, salvos tearing into the horde. One round nicked a tendril, lopping it off with a splatter of thick slime that scorched a fighter's footwear, blistering skin and eliciting a sharp oath while he ground it away. "Flank left—pin them!" Harlan bellowed, his weapon recoiling to fracture a anomaly's edge, frag-

ments lodging in the ground like jagged caltrops that punctured a boot sole, forcing a squadmate to limp rearward, teeth clenched. The chamber constricted amid attack, walls creaking as quakes escalated, knocking slabs from overhead that crashed in crushing booms. A ghostly blade clipped Terry's shield, the kinetic backlash shoving him into a console; his shoulder ached from the impact, sight fuzzing for an instant. He retaliated with a plasma burst that vaporized the attacker's arm, the limb evaporating in a pop of superheated air that singed his hair. "Archives show the leader's path—core vaults, replicating the Sundering!" Terry bellowed over the chaos, dodging a tendril that whipped past his ear, its tip nicking his cheek and leaving a burning mark that oozed taint. "He's anchoring projections to rip apart multiversal breaches—weaponize the corruption across dimensions!" Kael parried a sword thrust, his shield cracking under the strain, fragments of force nicking his forearm and trickling drops of crimson. "Then we end it here. Seal that projection-breach at the center—it's the source!" The team closed in on the growing fissure, jaws of churning gloom at the chamber's core, borders hardening into throbbing teeth that chomped with sloshy cracks. Elara's vines plunged into the edge, roots burrowing to pry it apart from within, pricks extracting spurts of slick sap that coated her arms, the sear forcing her to clench her jaw but grip tight. Lirael summoned a tempestweave, gales screaming to channel bolts into the core, the surge illuminating the abyss's depths where shadows writhed like buried leviathans. Terry overlaid his nexus code, plasma threads weaving a containment grid that buzzed with mounting tension, the air ionizing until it crackled against skin. Reyes covered them, her team's barrage holding back the ghosts—shots pounding into chests, reeling shapes grasping injuries that appeared as cuts then vanished. A fighter lunged at Harlan, blade slicing his thigh deep enough to buckle his knee; he fired point-blank, the slug detonating the ghost's skull in a burst of ethereal mist, but collapsed clutching the gash, blood soaking his fatigues. The breach trembled, shrinking beneath the onslaught. Vines tore free with a rip, anomalies collapsing in cascades of sludge that pooled and hardened into brittle spikes. The grid sealed with a thunderclap, the fissure imploding in a vacuum rush that sucked debris inward, leaving the air heavy and still. But the victory rang hollow. Distant howls reverberated

from side tunnels—awakened remnants, lured by the commotion, their shell-scrapes growing into a horde's rumble. Kael reloaded his conduit, perspiration dripping from his forehead as he probed the darkness. "Alliance holds, but they're coming fast. Survivors from the east wing—link up or get overrun." Elara hauled Harlan to his feet, muscles taut from his bulk, while Lirael dispersed lingering sparks with a gale that scattered the bitter fog. Terry pocketed the slate, its glow dimming, but a fresh pulse throbbed from the walls—veins swelling, birthing new crystalline scuttlers that scratched over the stone. The ground lurched once more, and from an expanding fissure crawled a bigger horror, its eyes gleaming with corruption's hunger.

Chapter 7: Veins of Legacy

The vault's ceiling groaned like a beast in its death throes, chunks of ferrocrete plummeting in staccato bursts that forced the group to weave between jagged stalactites of fallen debris. Terry's boots skidded on the slick residue of crushed crystalline scuttlers, their shattered husks crunching underfoot with a brittle snap that echoed off the buckling walls. Ozone hung thick in the air, mingling with the acrid tang of ionized metal from recent plasma discharges. He scanned the narrowing passage ahead—left fork dipped into a pool of bubbling ichor that hissed against the stone, right veered toward a fractured archway where pulsating veins throbbed like exposed arteries, ready to lash out. Fleeing into the pool risked the acid eating through his reinforced suit; blasting the veins might trigger a collapse. His immediate goal: punch through to the chamber beyond, where the data slate's signal pulsed strongest. He raised his gauntlet, calibrating a low-yield kinetic pulse to clear the archway without shattering the supports entirely. Elara flanked him, her bracers humming as thorny vines slithered from the cuffs, probing the air like questing serpents coated in that same glistening black residue. She crouched low, fingers digging into a fissure for leverage as she hauled herself over a toppled beam, her breath steady despite the sweat beading on her brow. Lirael brought up the rear with Harlan's squad—five hardened survivors now down to three after the last brute's rampage—and Kael's ragtag alliance of

academy mages, their rifles slung low and stormweaves crackling at their fingertips. One of Harlan's men, a burly engineer named Voss—no relation, she'd quipped earlier—limped from a scuttler gash, his face twisted in a grimace as he pressed a cauterized patch to his thigh. "Veins are thickening," Lirael muttered, her voice cutting through the rumble like a whipcrack. She gestured with a free hand, summoning a gust that scattered phantom insect swarms—illusory at first, but solidifying into chitinous horrors that buzzed with hallucinatory fury. One latched onto a mage's shoulder, its mandibles grinding before a storm-laced bolt from her palm vaporized it in a spray of caustic mist. The air filled with the screech of evaporating shells and the sharp, metallic bite of fear on Terry's tongue. They breached the archway with a synchronized push: Terry's pulse shattered the vein cluster in a spray of oily shards that pattered like hot rain, Elara's vines whipping forward to snare the fragments mid-air and drag them into a crushing coil. The squad advanced in a staggered line, rifles barking suppressive fire at the shadows that writhed along the walls. The passage opened into a cavernous sub-vault, its floor a mosaic of cracked tiles veined with glowing fissures. In the center loomed a pedestal console, half-buried under a cascade of rubble, its holographic emitter flickering weakly. Terry's slate synced with a chime, pulling up fragmented logs that projected into the dim light—ghostly blue silhouettes of a man in a lab coat, his features eerily similar to Terry's own sharp jawline. The first log crackled to life as they formed a perimeter, weapons trained on the encroaching gloom. "Entry 47: Nexus-weave integration with rift energies shows promise," the figure intoned, his voice distorted by static. "By converting mana flows into stable plasma matrices, we can anchor dimensional tears. But the blight... it's adaptive. It mirrors the weave, amplifies it. If weaponized, it could reshape battlefields—turn enemies into extensions of the rift itself." Terry's jaw tightened, his fingers hovering over the console's interface, rerouting power from his gauntlet to stabilize the feed. He considered yanking the drive and running—too risky with the veins pulsing faster now, threatening to flood the chamber. Instead, he delved deeper, downloading schematics that bloomed in his HUD: blueprints for amplifiers that funneled Riftblight into symbiotic implants, forging soldiers from corrupted flesh and metal. Elara leaned in, her vines retracting

with a soft rustle as she traced a rune on the pedestal. “This is your bloodline’s shadow,” she said, her tone laced with a quiet edge, eyes flicking to Terry without accusation. But her grip on the bracer tightened, knuckles whitening—a silent tether against the revelations uncoiling. Before Lirael could respond, the vault shuddered. From the fissures erupted spectral guardians—echoes of Sundering warriors, their forms translucent at first, coalescing into hulking silhouettes armored in fused bone and rusted plate, crystalline veins threading through their limbs like frozen lightning. One lunged from the left wall, its axe manifesting from solidified ether, cleaving toward Harlan’s squad with a whoosh that stirred dust into choking clouds. Voss dove right, rolling behind a pillar as the blade gouged a crater in the floor, sparks flying from severed conduits. The impact shook the ground, sending tremors up Terry’s legs; he weighed options—channel a full plasma lattice to engulf the group, or target the veins anchoring them to the stone. The lattice risked overheating his core, leaving him exposed; severing the veins first might destabilize the echoes entirely. “Anchor points—hit the crystals!” Terry barked, pivoting to unleash a lance of superheated plasma that speared the nearest vein, melting it into slag with a hiss of steam and the scent of burnt sugar. The guardian staggered, its form flickering, but retaliated with a sweep that forced him to erect a kinetic shield—translucent energy rippling like heated air, absorbing the blow with a thunderous crack that numbed his arm. Elara surged forward, bracers flaring as vines exploded outward in a thorny entanglement, coiling around the guardian’s legs with barbs that pierced ethereal armor. The plant matter sizzled on contact with the crystalline veins, black residue bubbling as it sought purchase. She yanked back, muscles straining, hauling the echo off-balance into Lirael’s path. Lightning arced from the stormweaver’s palms in jagged forks, slamming into the exposed core with a deafening pop—ozone bloomed sharp and electric, the guardian’s form fracturing into shards that rained down, slicing shallow gashes across a mage’s arm before dissolving into wisps. But the assault multiplied. More echoes materialized, their weapons solidifying mid-swing—swords that clanged against rifle barrels, hammers that pulverized cover into gravel. Hallucinatory overlays warped the fray: one squad member swung at phantoms, exposing his flank to a real axe that bit deep into his shoulder, blood spray-

ing in a hot arc before Kael dragged him back, cauterizing the wound with a hasty plasma shot. Harlan roared orders, his rifle chattering in bursts that punched craters into a guardian's chest, metal groaning as it buckled. "Flank left—Voss, cover the console!" Terry's mind raced through trajectories: dodge the hammer's arc by sliding under the pedestal, or counter with a shield bash to buy Elara space for another vine snare. The risk of the pedestal toppling held him—the archive's data was irreplaceable, a key to unraveling the syndicate's blueprint. He chose the slide, boots scraping tile as he fired upward, plasma grazing the hammer-wielder's arm and shearing off a crystalline spur in a shower of sparks. The guardian howled, a sound like grinding gears, and shattered an obelisk anchor nearby—jagged spire pulsing with veins that whipped like flails, lashing Voss across the chest and sending him crumpling with a gasp. Losses mounted in the chaos: Kael's mage fell to a hallucinatory swarm that turned solid mid-air, claws raking his throat in a gurgle of blood and static. Elara's vines severed two tendrils, their oily lengths thrashing before going limp, but a guardian's boot crushed her extended bracer, thorns splintering with a crack that drew a hiss from her lips. Lirael unleashed a storm barrage, winds howling through the vault to buffet the echoes, lightning chaining between anchors in explosive bursts that lit the chamber in strobing white—ground quaking, air thick with the reek of scorched stone and singed fur. They pressed toward the vault's heart, a throbbing ritual chamber where veins converged into a colossal nexus—a pulsating heart of Riftblight, oily black and veined with iridescent cracks. The armored leader stood at its core, silhouette backlit by the glow, gauntlets interfacing with rune-etched panels. Terry's arrogance flared in a smirk—he'd outmaneuvered worse simulations—but it twisted into a scowl as the leader turned, visor gleaming. "Your father's legacy serves better than you ever will, boy." No time for retorts. Terry calibrated his gauntlet for an amplified lattice, plasma coils humming as he weighed the seal: overload the nexus directly, or weave a grid to contain the pulse. The direct hit could rupture the chamber; the grid demanded precision under fire. Echoes closed in, axes whistling. He opted for the grid, fingers dancing over controls as Elara's remaining vines lashed out, entangling the leader's legs in a bid to stall. Lirael hurled lightning to cover, bolts forking

toward the nexus with crackling fury. The lattice ignited in a web of searing blue, slamming into the colossal vein with a roar that drowned the guardians' shrieks—ichor erupted in geysers, scorching the floor and forcing the group to scramble back over steaming puddles. The seal held partially, the nexus contracting with a wet snap, but backlash ripped through: a multiversal echo boomed outward, distorting the air into rippling waves that hurled debris and revealed holographic fragments—visions of Terry's father, not as pioneer, but conspirator, his experiments birthing the syndicate's horrors. The leader wrenched free, boots pounding toward a side vent as the chamber buckled. Terry lunged after, gauntlet recharging with a whine, plasma lance priming for the pursuit.

Terry's boots skidded on the slick vent grating as he dove after the leader, the air warping with residual projections that bent light into fractured rainbows. The armored figure vanished around a bend, servos whirring in the distance, but Terry's gauntlet locked on—thermal bloom slicing through the haze like a predator's gaze. "Flank left, Elara—vines on the walls to slow him!" he bellowed, fingers clamping the controls tighter, hubris propelling the order despite the holographic ghosts flickering in his periphery: his father's face, stern and shadowed, mouthing equations that curdled into screams. Elara nodded sharply, her bracer's thorns retracting with a grind as she knelt, palms slamming the ferrocrete. Roots erupted in a frenzy, coiling like pythons up the tunnel walls, their barbs rasping against metal as they snagged at the leader's trailing cloak. She glanced at Lirael, gaze sharpening in assessment. "Your storms next—channel them narrow, or we'll flood the whole shaft." No plea, just tactical bite, her stance widening to brace against the recoil. Lirael flexed her fingers, ozone crackling between them, and conjured a focused gale—winds slicing forward in a howling funnel that battered the roots into rigid spears, pinning the leader's boot mid-stride. The figure twisted, rifle spitting mana-charged rounds that scorched the air, one grazing Elara's shoulder and drawing a bead of blood that sizzled on her skin. "Tighten it, Terry—your grid's too wide; it'll vent the whole corridor!" Lirael snapped, her free hand gesturing a whip-crack to redirect a stray bolt into the floor, cratering it with a thunderous pop that showered

them in pulverized stone. Harlan's squad—three remnants, faces smeared with grime—fanned out behind, rifles crackling in disciplined bursts that chewed divots into the pursuing shadows. Kael, the wiry instructor with his stormweave cloak frayed at the edges, covered the rear, his bolt launching a kinetic pulse that flattened a surging vein attempting to block their path. The tunnel shuddered, crystalline veins pulsing along the ceiling like exposed arteries, dripping oily residue that sizzled on contact with the floor. They burst into a narrower vault, walls etched with faded runes now alive with iridescent cracks. The leader had paused at a console pedestal, gauntlets jacked in, but yanked free as Terry's plasma lance pierced out—a searing blue spear that vaporized a chunk of the pedestal, molten slag splattering and fusing to the leader's pauldron in a corona of steam. The figure staggered, visor cracking under the heat, then bolted toward a concealed archway, crystalline scuttlers skittering from the shadows to intercept. "Archive ahead—father's markings," Terry muttered, recognizing the rune patterns from old sims, his smirk fading into a grim line as he recalibrated, energy shields flickering to life around his arms with a buzz of repulsors. The scuttlers—fist-sized horrors with jagged quartz limbs—swarmed in a chittering wave, their claws etching furrows in the stone as they leaped. Elara's vines whipped out, crushing a cluster into glittering pulp that sprayed shards like broken glass, embedding in a squad member's leg; he grunted, binding the wound with a field dressing that smoked from proximity to the corruption. Lirael spun, conjuring a maelstrom that hoisted the scuttlers aloft, their bodies shattering against the ceiling in a rain of crystalline dust that stung exposed skin like acid rain. "Forge ahead—don't let them bottleneck us!" she called, her winds parting to reveal the archway: a dust-shrouded chamber, consoles buzzing faintly amid cobwebbed data crystals. They piled in, Harlan's rifle crackling to clear the threshold as the door irised shut behind with a pneumatic sizzle. The air hung heavy, laced with the metallic tang of dormant circuits and the faint, acrid bite of preserved ozone. Terminals glowed dimly, screens flickering to life at Terry's approach, his gauntlet interfacing with a soft click. Holograms bloomed—schematics of Nexus-weaves, twisted into fractal patterns that mimicked the veins snaking the walls. Elara leaned against a console, breath steadying, her fingers tracing

a thorn pattern on the edge as if testing its stability. "These logs... they're not just designs. Look—containment failures, deliberate." Her voice held no accusation, just a pointed tilt of her head toward the display, where a simulation showed a breach expanding under controlled overload. Lirael hovered near a crystal array, her hand hovering before slotting in a probe from her bracer. "Verify the feeds first—could be traps laced with those hallucinations." As if summoned, the air thickened; one squad member clutched his temples, knees buckling as phantom screams reverberated in his ears—real enough to draw blood from bitten lips—while smoke curled from vents that weren't there, choking the space with illusory fumes that burned throats. Kael shook it off with a bellowed order, his pulse shattering a manifesting shadow that solidified into a claw mid-swipe. "Focus fire on the anchors—those obelisks pulsing in the corners." Indeed, four crystalline spires throbbed at the chamber's edges, veins feeding into them like umbilical cords, birthing spectral guardians: projections of Sundering warriors, their forms half-armor, half-quartz, axes gleaming with embedded shards. Terry's gaze sharpened, pulling data streams as the first guardian charged, bootplate cracking the floor tiles. "Father's experiments... he engineered the stability thresholds, but they pushed for weaponization. Syndicate twisted it." The revelation struck like a gut punch, but he channeled it into action, gauntlet surging as he fired an amplified lattice—a grid of plasma filaments that webbed toward the nearest obelisk, superheating the crystal until it fractured with a resonant shatter, shards exploding outward and embedding in the guardian's chest like shrapnel, ichor bubbling from the rents. Elara moved in tandem, her vines surging from the floor in thorny cascades, wrapping the guardian's legs and yanking it off-balance; the projection toppled, armor grinding sparks as it crashed, but not before its axe cleaved a vine cluster, barbs flying to lacerate her arm in shallow gashes that wept green sap mixed with blood. She winced, flexing to test the damage, then gestured sharply at Harlan. "Your rounds on the veins—cauterize before they regrow." Harlan nodded, squad unleashing a barrage: bullets laced with mana-cells detonating on impact, searing black tendrils into charred husks that curled and smoked, filling the air with the char of burnt-sugar stench. One tendril lashed back, coiling around a rifle barrel and melting it into slag, forcing the

wielder to drop it with a curse, hands blistering. Lirael countered the second guardian with a storm-laced barrage, winds funneling lightning into a chained bolt that arced across the chamber, striking the obelisk base and erupting in a fountain of molten quartz that pooled and hardened into jagged spikes, impaling the projection's foot and rooting it in place. The air buzzed with static, her hair standing on end as she pressed the assault, but a hallucinatory wave hit—vivid flashes of feline shadows lunging from the walls, claws raking her vision until she blinked them away, nausea roiling her gut like swallowed thorns. "They're adapting—projections fusing with the crystals!" Terry bellowed, data slate in his off-hand compiling logs: father's notes on corruption as a "controllable mutagen," hijacked by the syndicate for implants like those on the intruders. Rage twisted his features into a snarl, but he funneled it, overloading his lance to sever a central vein feeding the third obelisk. The plasma beam carved through with a sizzle, oily fluid erupting in a pressurized jet that scalded the floor and forced Kael to dive, his cloak singed at the hem. The fourth guardian lumbered forward, quartz veins bulging along its arms, swinging an axe that whistled and cleaved a console in half, sparks flying in a lethal spray. Elara's remaining vines entangled its weapon arm, thorns piercing joints with pops of fracturing crystal, while Lirael's gale hurled debris into its visor, cracking it further. Harlan's squad poured fire, rounds punching craters that wept luminescent fluid, but losses mounted—a man fell to a tendril's crush, ribs snapping audibly, his cry cut short. Terry synced the slate, downloading the final schematics as the chamber trembled, obelisks dimming under the assault. But the leader's voice crackled from a hidden intercom, laced with static. "You seal one vein, boy, and ten more pulse. Your bloodline started this—finish it if you dare." The archway beyond the consoles ground open, revealing a deeper ritual heart: walls veined in titanic profusion, converging on a throbbing core where the leader interfaced anew, silhouette etched in pulsing black. Terry pocketed the slate, gauntlet whirring to prime a containment grid, but doubt flickered—a glance at Elara's bloodied arm, Lirael's strained stance. Hubris warred with the logs' weight; he stepped forward anyway, plasma coils igniting as the guardians' remnants stirred, crystalline shards rattling across the floor toward the breach. Elara's vines lashed to clear a path,

roots grinding stone to dust.

Terry's boots crunched over the crystalline shards, each step sending brittle cracks echoing like distant gunfire through the vault. The air thickened with the acrid tang of ionized metal, mingling with the ever-present ozone bite from ruptured corruption veins. Elara's vines retracted with a wet snap, coiling back into her gauntleted fists as she surveyed the archway, her breath coming in measured huffs that fogged her visor. Lirael flanked her, fingers twitching at her sides, summoning faint sparks that danced along her skin like errant fireflies, her emerald gaze sharpened against the hallucinatory afterimages still clawing at the edges of her sight. "Leader's baiting us," Harlan growled from the rear, his rifle slung low as he helped Kael haul a limping squadmate forward. The man's arm dangled uselessly, crushed by an earlier tendril strike, bone grinding audibly with each jolt. "That voice—it's goading. Means he's cornered." "Or prepared," Lirael shot back, her voice slicing through the rumble of shifting stone. Gale swirled around her boots, stirring dust into eddies that masked their advance. She shot Terry a sidelong glare, unspoken: *Your call, prodigy. Don't lead us into a grave.* Terry ignored the barb, his gauntlet buzzing as it projected a faint blue lattice ahead—a shimmering net of runic threads probing for traps. The archway gaped wider, exhaling a gust laced with burnt-sugar stench, the corruption's signature reek that coated his throat like ash. Beyond lay the ritual heart: a cavernous chamber where walls pulsed with corruption veins thicker than his thigh, black ichor slithering beneath translucent skins of crystal. They converged on a raised dais at the center, where the armored leader knelt, hands buried in a console that sparked and buzzed, feeding data into the throbbing core—a titanic nexus of interwoven tendrils, quivering like a heart mid-beat. No room for finesse. Terry thrust his arm forward, plasma coils flaring to life with a shrill whir. "Grid out—pin those corruption veins!" Bolts of superheated plasma erupted from his gauntlet, curving toward the nearest wall-cluster. They struck with thunderous cracks, gouging trenches that oozed boiling liquid, the impacts hurling gobbets of corrupted stone across the floor. One glob splattered near Elara's feet, sizzling through her boot's sole and blistering her ankle; she winced, stomping it out with a stomp that cracked

the tile. Elara retaliated without pause, slamming her palms to the ground. Thorny roots burst forth in a frenzy, emerald coils thicker than ropes piercing upward to ensnare a bulging corruption vein. They pierced with squelching punctures, thorns grinding inward as the ichor surged back, pressure building until the corruption vein ruptured in a spray that doused a nearby squadman. He staggered, skin bubbling where it touched, flesh warping into ridged scales that locked his joints mid-scream. Kael dragged him back, bellowing commands to cauterize the wound with a flare from his sidearm—the sizzle drowned his gurgled protests. From the dais, the leader rose, armor etched in glowing runes that mimicked Terry's own weave—stolen tech, twisted. "Predictable, Prince heir," the figure intoned, voice amplified through helmet filters, a metallic grate that sliced through the clamor. "Your father's designs were elegant. We merely... perfected them." A gesture, and the nexus core belched forth new guardians: not full specters, but armored husks fused with crystalline corruption veins, their forms half-man, half-aberration. One charged, its axe-arm elongated by jagged quartz, swinging in a blur that cleaved the air with a sonic boom. Lirael met it head-on, channeling a stormweave that coalesced into a howling maelstrom. Gale-force winds hammered the guardian, hurling it sideways into a wall; the impact dented its chestplate, ribs—or what passed for them—crunching inward with a sound like splintering ice. But it rebounded, corruption veins pulsing to knit the wound, and lashed out with a backhand that caught her shoulder. The blow spun her like a top, slamming her against a console; pain pierced through her collarbone, a sharp twinge that made her arm hang numb, vision blurring with involuntary tears. "Flank it!" Terry bellowed, pivoting to unleash a kinetic shield—a dome of rippling energy that deflected a second guardian's hurled shard. The projectile ricocheted, lodging in the ceiling with a shudder that rained dust, forcing Harlan's squad to scatter. Rounds crackled from their rifles, storm-laced by Lirael's lingering gales, punching divots into the guardians' forms. One bullet nicked a corruption vein, eliciting a high-pitched screech as fluid jetted out, scalding a shooter's hand—he dropped his weapon, fingers blistering red, cursing as he switched to his off-hand. Elara seized her opening, vines whipping like flails to shatter an obelisk anchor at the dais's edge. The struc-

ture toppled with a groan, crystals fracturing in a cascade that carved shallow cuts across her thigh, blood welling warm and sticky. She gritted her teeth, ignoring the sting, and directed roots to bind the leader's legs. They coiled tight, thorns drawing beads of oily ichor from his armor's joints, but he activated a counter-weave: runes flared, repelling the growth with bursts of kinetic force that shredded the vines into confetti, sending fibrous barbs flying to pepper the group's flanks. The chamber trembled, tremors rattling teeth as more corruption veins erupted from the floor—pseudopods thick as tree trunks, tipped with maws of crystalline teeth. One snagged Kael's boot, yanking him downward; he fired point-blank, the round exploding inside the maw in a spray of shards that lacerated his leg from knee to shin, muscle tearing with a wet rip. He collapsed, chest heaving, the squad hauling him free amid suppressive fire. Terry's thoughts whirled, slate's logs burning in his thoughts: father's notes on mutagens, meant to stabilize breaches, now fueling this nightmare. Hubris ignited—*I can end it, better than he ever could*—but Elara's strained grunt pulled him back. She bled from multiple cuts, vines faltering as exhaustion carved lines around her eyes. He bellowed, "Elara, Lirael—close in on the core! I'll anchor the guardians!" They nodded, tactical silence conveying trust and tension: trust, laced with the strain of her doubt in his precision, Lirael's wariness of overreach. Lirael limped forward, conjuring lightning that arced from her fingertips in jagged forks, striking a pseudopod and vaporizing a segment in a flash that left retinal burns, spots dancing in her vision. The thunderclap deafened nearby allies, ears ringing as they shook off the stun. Harlan's squad laid down cover, bullets screaming off plating as a guardian lumbered through their line. It impaled one man through the gut with its quartz spike, lifting him high; his body seized, blood frothing from his mouth in a coppery mist before he went limp, dropped in a heap that crunched underfoot. Losses piled—three down now, the air heavy with the iron tang of spilled blood and charred flesh. Terry synced his gauntlet to the slate's schematics, projecting an amplified plasma lattice across the chamber. Threads wove into a web, igniting on contact with the corruption veins; they sizzled and popped, segments collapsing inward with implosive crunches that shook the dais. The leader reeled, interface sparking as power faltered. "Foolish boy," he

snarled, ripping free a panel to reveal a secondary core—paternal runes, carved in familiar script. "This inheritance devours its own." Fury ignited in Terry's chest, manifesting as a clenched jaw, gauntlet trembling. He funneled it into a final surge: plasma lances converged, blasting the core's outer shell. It fractured with a deafening crack, ichor flooding out in a tidal wave that singed his legs, fabric melting to skin in blistering patches. Elara's vines sealed the wound partially, thorns cauterizing edges with sizzling seals, while Lirael's storm battered the leader back, gales screaming to strip his footing. But the partial seal backlashed. The nexus core seized, corruption veins retracting only to pulse anew, deeper. A multiversal projection tore open—a shimmering breach not on Earth, but bleeding hues of crimson sky and sulfurous fumes from some volcanic hellscape. Through it glimpsed ash-choked air, reptilian shadows gliding on obsidian rafts amid erupting geysers that hurled molten slag in fiery arcs. The ground shuddered violently, pulling at the chamber's seams. The leader chuckled, an empty reverberation, lunging toward the breach. "Your blood opened doors, Terry. The syndicate thanks you." He dove through, silhouette vanishing as the breach stabilized—not sealed, but bridged. Terry collapsed to one knee, plasma coils overheating with a whir, scorching his palm where he gripped too tight. Elara knelt beside him, pressing a poultice to his blisters—her touch steady, eyes meeting his with quiet accusation: *We paid for your certainty.* Lirael stood guard, lightning crackling faintly, the group's chests heaving in the sudden hush. Shards settled, but the breach's rumble promised more—familial sins uncoiling into the multiverse's veins. Harlan reloaded with a click, surveying the breach. "That's no Earth breach. Whatever your old man wrought, it's spreading." Terry rose, slate clutched like a talisman, hubris fractured but not shattered. He nodded toward the breach, vines already probing its edges. "Then we follow. End it properly." The group forged ahead, boots slipping on ichor-slick stone, into the pulsing unknown.

The air grew dense as they crossed the breach's threshold, sulfurous fumes clawing at their throats like talons dipped in acid. Terry's boots sank into ashen grit, each step grinding against obsidian flecks that bit through his soles. The volcanic expanse stretched before them—not a full world, but a fractured pocket

bridged to the academy's underbelly, crimson skies boiling overhead with geysers spewing globs of molten rock that sizzled on impact. Elara's vines snaked ahead, roots probing the cracked ground for stability, while Lirael conjured a maelstrom to fan away the choking haze, her fingers splaying wide to direct the gusts. Harlan's squad fanned out, rifles trained on the shadows. One soldier, Reyes, knelt to scrape a sample of the oily residue pooling in fissures—his glove sizzled on contact, material bubbling. "This stuff's eating through composites," he muttered, flicking it away with a grimace that twisted his scarred lip. "Pushing forward blind's suicide. We need eyes on those veins first." Terry ignored the caution, slate buzzing in his grip as he probed the terrain. The device overlaid holographic grids, mapping pulsating conduits buried beneath the lava-veined stone. "The archive's signal is faint, but it's here—tied to the paternal runes. We cut through." His voice carried a clipped edge, jaw clenched as he forged ahead, plasma gauntlet recharging with a low whir. A tremor rippled outward, the ground splitting to belch steam that scalded Lirael's arm, raising welts that throbbed with each heartbeat. She hissed, channeling the pain into a bolt of electricity that arced toward an emerging tendril—black, vein-thick, it writhed from the fissure, tipped with crystalline barbs. The strike charred its length, segments popping like overripe fruit, but more surged up, lashing at the group. Elara unleashed an arrow fletched with thorned leaves; it embedded in a tendril's core, injecting sap that swelled the tissue until it burst in a spray of viscous fluid. "Flank them," she called, her stance widening as she nocked another, gaze flicking to Terry's unyielding push. The gesture spoke her doubt—roots coiling tighter around her ankles for purchase. The squad unleashed fire, rounds punching craters into the veins, but the corruption knit back, shards reforming with grinding snaps. Terry wove a lattice of plasma, threads of superheated blue fire weaving into a net that draped over the cluster. It seared through, the material vaporizing in explosive puffs that hurled shards skyward, raining down like jagged hail. One fragment grazed Harlan's shoulder, embedding deep enough to wrench his arm sideways, joint popping with a sickening grind that left him grunting through clenched teeth. They forged ahead, the bridge's edges fraying—multiversal distortions warping the air into heat mirages that distorted their aim. Deeper in, the

volcanic facade gave way to vaulted chambers, academy stone bleeding through the breach like infected tissue. Crystalline veins webbed the walls, pulsing with inner light, and obelisks of warped metal jutted from the floor, anchors buzzing with residual energy. Lirael traced a rune on her bow, wind howling as she unleashed a barrage of storm-laced arrows. They struck an obelisk, gales shearing off chunks that tumbled with boulder-like thuds, cracking the floor. "These aren't random," she bellowed, wiping sweat-stung eyes. "They're channeling something—hit the bases, or they'll regenerate." Reyes nodded, shouldering his rifle to blast the pedestal; the impact buckled it, but hallucinatory assaults followed—phantom insects swarming from the debris, illusions solidifying into chitinous horrors that buzzed with razor wings. One latched onto a squad member's neck, mandibles clamping down to tear flesh in ragged strips, blood welling hot and immediate. The man staggered, clawing it free, his free hand pressing the gash as arterial spray painted the stone. Elara countered with a wave of entangling roots, summoned from the ashen soil; they burst forth, coiling around the swarm and crushing them in fibrous grips that popped exoskeletons like eggshells. Terry's kinetic shield flared, absorbing a wing-slash that hammered his ribs, the force compressing his chest until breath came in shallow wheezes, each inhale a fire in his side. They shattered two more obelisks, barrages of plasma and stormweave reducing them to slag and splintered crystal. Losses mounted—another soldier fell to a vein's whip, the lash coiling his leg and yanking him into a fissure, his scream reverberating as he vanished into bubbling depths. Harlan's face hardened, a vein ticking in his temple as he reloaded. "You're bleeding us dry for ghosts, Prince. Archive or not, we pull back if it tightens." The hidden paternal archive revealed itself in an alcove, a console etched with Nexus runes flickering to life at Terry's touch. Holograms bloomed: his father's voice, grainy but resonant, detailing experiments—Nexus-weaves fused with breach energies, intended to stabilize breaches but yielding volatile blueprints. "The corruption isn't chaos," the recording intoned, "it's adaptive. Weaponize it, and worlds fold." Schematics scrolled, showing vein networks mirroring the syndicate's designs, unintended legacies of hubris. Terry's fingers tightened on the edge, knuckles blanching, as the data synced to his slate. Elara glanced over,

her hand hovering near a protruding crystal—testing its pulse, brow furrowing at the familial echo in the code. "This mirrors your weaves," she said softly, withdrawing as if burned. "Archaic or not, it warns against forcing seals." Before he could retort, the chamber awoke. Legacy guardians erupted from the walls—spectral projections of Sundering warriors, translucent forms armored in fused crystal veins, swords manifesting as they solidified. One charged, blade sweeping in an arc that cleaved air with a sonic boom, forcing Lirael to dive; the edge grazed her thigh, parting muscle in a deep furrow that buckled her leg, sending her skidding across gravel that abraded her palms raw. The guardians moved with eerie precision, veins granting them regenerative pulses—limbs regrowing in crystalline sheaths after plasma strikes melted them to slag. Terry funneled energy into amplified lattices, grids of plasma expanding to encompass a pair; they ignited, armor bubbling and fracturing in explosive bursts that showered the group with molten flecks, one searing Reyes' cheek to leave a puckered scar amid the sizzle. Elara's thorny entanglements lashed out, vines piercing joints to inject corrosive sap that dissolved the crystals from within, guardians staggering as their forms cracked like fault lines. Harlan's squad laid down suppressive fire, rounds embedding in torsos to erupt outwards in wet bursts, but a guardian's counter-swing caught one in the gut, the impact folding him double and hurling him against a wall with bone-crunching force, ribs splintering to pierce lungs in frothy gasps. Lirael rose, limping, and conjured a storm torrent—lightning forking into the fray, chaining between guardians to overload their veins. Electricity danced, charring limbs to brittle husks that shattered under bootfalls, the air thick with ozone and the tang of fried metal. Yet the hallucinations intensified: phantom blades slashing from nowhere, one nicking Terry's arm to draw a line of fire that numbed his fingers, gauntlet sparking erratically. They carved through, severing tendrils that fed the guardians—plasma lances cauterizing roots that writhed in retreat, storms battering anchors until obelisks toppled in rumbling cascades. Heavy losses pressed: Reyes dragged the gutted soldier back, his own breaths ragged from a cracked collarbone that ground with every motion. The path led to the pulsating ritual heart—a cavernous core where veins converged in a titanic nexus, throbbing like a heart unearthed. The armored leader

stood at its center, gauntlets interfacing with the mass, crimson light bathing his visor. “You chase projections, boy,” he intoned, voice modulated through static. “Your father’s genius birthed this—hubris veiled as progress.” Terry’s plasma coils whirred to life, but doubt flickered—a hesitation in his stance, slate’s weight pulling at his resolve. Elara and Lirael flanked him, vines probing the nexus’s edges while lightning gathered in crackling spheres. Harlan’s remaining squad circled, rifles crackling to pin the leader. The confrontation ignited. The leader unleashed a vein surge, pseudopods erupting to ensnare— one wrapped Elara’s ankle, yanking her off-balance; she countered with thorns that pierced and swelled the limb until it recoiled in a spray of ichor that splashed her face, stinging like nettles. Lirael hurled her storm, gales ripping at the leader’s armor, plates buckling with metallic groans, but a pseudopod slammed her shoulder, dislocating the joint in a blaze of agony that dropped her to a knee, arm dangling limp. Terry charged a partial seal, Nexus-weave threading into the nexus—plasma grids contracting to compress the core. It yielded, veins retracting with hydraulic sizzles, but the hubris in his push backlashed. The nexus convulsed, birthing a multiversal projection: a shockwave of distorted space that warped the chamber, pulling stone slabs inward and hurling debris in spiraling orbits. The leader staggered free, laughing as he retreated into a side fissure. Terry gripped his side, ribs protesting the strain, as the projection’s pull tugged at their forms—skin prickling, air compressing chests. The group regrouped, chests heaving amid the settling dust. But from the nexus’s depths, a new vein stirred, thicker, questing with barbs that scraped stone in hungry rasps.

Chapter 8: Volcanic Veins

The sulfurous air clawed at Terry’s throat, thick with the reek of molten rock and charred flesh. Rivulets of lava snaked through the jagged fissures of the volcanic pocket realm, casting erratic orange glows that danced across the labyrinthine veins—pulsating conduits of corruption, their oily black surfaces bubbling with heat-warped taint. Terry’s boots crunched over cooled obsidian shards as he led the ragged group forward, his gauntlet

buzzing with residual energy from the last seal. Elara flanked him on the left, her bow strung taut, while Lirael brought up the rear, her fingers twitching sparks that crackled against the humid haze. Harlan's squad—four grim-faced survivors with scorched rifles—and a handful from Kael's alliance trailed close, their chests heaving echoes in the cavern's roar. A low rumble vibrated the ground, and Terry halted, gaze probing the fork ahead: left vein curved downward into a steaming chasm, right sloped up toward flickering light. The armored leader's boot-prints—distorted by molten drips—veered right, but pseudopods burst from the left wall, fleshy black tendrils slick with lava, lashing out like whips. One nicked a squad member's arm, searing cloth and skin with a sizzle. Terry gauged the dodge: pivot right and lose ground, or blast through to cut off the spawn? The peril of collapse from the chasm held him—the vein's edge crumbled underfoot, promising a plunge into boiling depths. "Plasma grid, center vein—Elara, bind the base!" he bellowed, slapping his palm against his gauntlet. Bolts of superheated plasma pierced from his wrist, carving into the pseudopods with white-hot precision, vaporizing segments into acrid steam. Elara dropped to one knee, her hands plunging into a crack in the rock. Thorny vines burst forth, coiling around the tendrils' roots with barbed grips that punctured the oily hide, yanking them taut. Sap-like ichor sprayed, sizzling on the stone. Lirael whirled, conjuring a gale that whipped embers into a stinging maelstrom, forcing the pseudopods to retract with wet snaps. The squad unleashed suppressive bursts, bullets ricocheting off crystalline outcrops, buying the trio seconds to advance. They forged ahead right, the vein narrowing to a crawlspace where heat baked their armor, sweat stinging Terry's eyes. Deeper in, crystalline lava scuttlers skittered from alcoves—fist-sized horrors with jagged quartz shells veined in glowing red, their legs clicking like shattering glass. One latched onto a rifleman's boot, mandibles grinding through leather with a screech that set teeth on edge. Terry fired a kinetic pulse from his off-hand, the shockwave crumpling three shells into powder, shards embedding in the wall like shrapnel. But more poured from the ceiling, a chittering wave. Elara unleashed arrows tipped with entangling sap, pinning clusters to the floor where they thrashed, cracking their own carapaces. Lirael channeled a lightning fork, the bolt arcing through the

swarm in a chain of pops and bursts, leaving charred husks that smelled of ozone and overripe fruit. Harlan grunted, reloading with fingers blackened by soot, as Kael's survivors formed a firing line, their shots pulverizing stragglers into glittering dust. The pursuit twisted into a wider chamber, where hallucinatory fire elementals coalesced from the haze—swirling infernos shaped like humanoid torsos, their "flames" manifesting as blistering heat waves that warped the air. One lunged at Terry, its touch not burning but slamming him with a phantom blaze: his vision blurred with illusory flames licking his skin, the metallic tang of blood filling his mouth as if scorched from within. He staggered, knees buckling under a wave of nausea that twisted his gut like molten wire. No—physical, he reminded himself, shaking it off. The elemental's core pulsed with corruption crystals, vulnerable. "Target the hearts—plasma through the glow!" Terry rasped, thrusting his gauntlet forward. A bolt pierced the nearest, exploding the crystal in a shower of superheated fragments that pelted the ground, the elemental dissolving into harmless sparks. Elara weaved through the assault, vines lashing out to snare limbs, thorns drawing lines of sizzling ichor that cooled into brittle spikes. One elemental nicked her shoulder, flooding her senses with the scream of phantom winds—eardrums throbbing as if pierced by needles, her balance faltering on the slick vein floor. She clenched her jaw, loosing a vine spear that impaled its core, the backlash heat singeing her hair. Lirael bellowed, her stormweave unleashing a torrent that doused two elementals in crackling rain, steam billowing as lightning shattered their forms. The squad's rifles crackled in unison, bullets melting mid-air from the heat but close enough to fracture outer layers, forcing the apparitions to flicker. A survivor from Kael's group retched, clutching his head as an elemental induced a migraine that hammered like forge blows, but Harlan hauled him up, firing point-blank to end the threat. Chest heaving, the group emerged into a domed cavern, its walls etched with glowing runes. At the center loomed an obsidian obelisk, its surface embedded with a paternal archive node—a buzzing data core, its lights pulsing like a heartbeat. Terry's pulse quickened; those schematics could unravel the leader's game. He approached, gauntlet interfacing with a click, while Elara surveyed for traps, her fingers tracing the stone for hidden veins. Lirael stood guard,

sparks dancing on her fingertips. The node buzzed, projecting holograms: blueprints of volcanic breaches siphoned into a weaponized nexus, channeling corruption's mutations through multiversal conduits to corrupt entire realms. The leader aimed to detonate it here, birthing an army of corrupted horrors from Earth's scars. "Download it all," Terry muttered, the corner of his mouth twitching in a tight smirk as data streamed into his gauntlet. But the obelisk trembled, runes igniting in a cascade. A cataclysmic surge erupted—blackened lava geysering from the base, slamming the group like a tidal hammer. Terry flew back, ribs cracking against a boulder, the impact jarring his vision with white flashes. Elara twisted mid-air, vines cushioning her fall but scorching her palms raw. Lirael took the brunt, lightning fizzling as the surge bowled her into a wall, blood trickling from a gash on her temple. Harlan's squad scattered, one man screaming as pseudopods claimed his leg in a spray of gore. The air filled with the stench of burnt-sugar and seared meat. The leader's silhouette vanished into a pulsating tunnel ahead, the surge widening breaches to infernal sub-realms—cracks spewing ash-choked winds and distant howls. Terry pushed to his feet, ignoring the fire in his side, gaze fixed on the escape. Left breach spat embers that could ignite their path; right offered cover but slowed them. Peril the flames for speed? "Through the center—seal as we go!" He fired a plasma lattice to cauterize a spurting vein, the grid sizzling shut with a pop. Elara bound debris into a makeshift bridge over a lava pit, thorns digging into her wounded hands, while Lirael mustered a wind barrier against the ash, her breaths labored. Seismic tremors rocked the core, stone fracturing like eggshells. From the leader's portal—a churning maelstrom of molten black—emerged a guardian titan: a towering behemoth of fused rock and corruption, its limbs veined with lava rivers, fists like battering rams. It bellowed, the sound a ground-shaking thunder that loosened boulders, and charged, cracking the vein floor into craters. Terry dodged a swing that pulverized a stalagmite into dust, the whoosh of air buffeting him. Options flashed: flank left through the breach's heat or frontal plasma overload? The titan's hide resisted his initial bolt, melting only superficial layers. "Elara, roots to the joints—Lirael, storm the eyes!" he called, rolling right as a fist cratered the spot he'd stood. Elara slammed her palms down,

thorny tendrils erupting to wrap the brute's knees, thorns burrowing deep and drawing rivers of molten ichor that hardened into restraints. The titan strained, vines snapping with whips of steam. Lirael leaped onto a ledge, unleashing a lightning barrage that forked into the glowing ocular slits, the bolts exploding inward with deafening cracks, blinding it in bursts of superheated gas. Harlan's squad poured fire into the flanks, bullets embedding and detonating from the heat, while Kael's survivors hurled grenades that bloomed into shrapnel blooms. Terry wove a kinetic shield to deflect a flailing arm, then overcharged his gauntlet, plasma coalescing into a spear that he drove into the chest fissure. The titan shuddered, fissures spiderwebbing across its form as internal veins ruptured, lava erupting in geysers. It toppled with a seismic crash, the portal distorting in backlash—a warp of space that sucked air inward like a maelstrom. The group hurtled toward the unstable nexus threshold, Terry's hand snagging Elara's arm mid-tumble, as Lirael's lightning arced to stabilize their fall. They slammed into the threshold's edge, the realm's pull yanking them through with a final, bone-jarring lurch.

The threshold ejected them onto a jagged ledge of cooled lava, the air dense with sulfurous fumes that rasped their throats. Terry skidded across the obsidian surface, his boots gouging trenches in the brittle rock as he yanked Elara upright. Her weight tugged against his grasp, thorns from her earlier weave still lodged in her palms, trailing slender rivulets of blood that sizzled on the scorching stone. Lirael rolled beside them, her elbow smashing against a jutting spike, the collision jolting her arm and deadening her fingers. Harlan's squad sprawled in disarray, one rifleman hacking ash as he gripped a battered shoulder, while Kael's survivors sprang to their feet, grenades rattling in their pouches. The new expanse gaped like a suppurating gash in the realm's bowels: labyrinthine veins of molten corruption twisting through cavern walls, seething with oily black that radiated from within like smoldering coals. Remote thunders reverberated, the ground surging in rhythmic throbs that splintered crevices wide enough to engulf a boot. The armored leader's outline stuttered ahead, dissolving into a tunnel maw laced with crimson fissures, his exosuit's thrusters trailing ionized vapor. "Hold formation—gaze

on the veins," Terry bellowed, his gauntlet buzzing as he probed for thermal flares. He disregarded the throb in his snagged arm, clenching it to dispel the deadness. Elara clamped a hand to her flank, where a rib ached from the jolt, each inhalation wrenching a grimace as she conjured vines to lash a crumbling ledge into solidity. Lirael flexed her arm, sparks flickering from her fingertips, her stare locked on the tunnel. "That bastard's priming something vaster. We intercept him, or this whole pocket frays." They forged ahead, boots grinding over pumice that disintegrated underfoot, demanding sidesteps around gaping abysses where lava pools bubbled below. The air thickened, bearing down like tangible force, and Harlan's squad spread out, rifles sweeping sweeps that snagged glimmers of motion in the shadows. A pseudopod burst from a vein wall abruptly, a stout tendril of molten taint cracking out to slash at the lead rifleman. It crashed into his chest plate, the blow flinging him sideways into a boulder; he collided with a groan, armor buckling inward and squeezing his lungs, leaving him gasping as he returned fire. Slugs tore into the pseudopod, dark ichor erupting in arcs that solidified mid-air into glassy splinters. Elara retaliated, pounding her fist into the ground; thorny roots thrust from crevices, twisting around the tendril's root and compressing until it ruptured with a fleshy snap, steaming slurry pooling at their feet. "Watch the walls—they're alive," she said through clenched teeth, her injured hands slippery as she withdrew the vines. Terry nodded, crafting a plasma lance that curved overhead, superheating the air into a rippling shield that evaporated the next outburst before it could coalesce. Farther below, the tunnel constricted to a crawlspace glazed with congealed corruption, compelling them to inch along on elbows and knees. Crystalline lava scuttlers clattered from fissures—fist-sized abominations with faceted bodies that splintered the glow into dazzling bursts, their legs scraping like fracturing glass. One clamped onto Lirael's calf as she advanced, its jaws chewing through her boot leather and puncturing skin; she yelped, the puncture igniting fire up her leg, sinews locking in convulsions that almost folded her knee. She spun, discharging a close-range lightning bolt that charred the creature, its carapace detonating in a burst of molten shards that pelted her thigh like scalding pebbles. "Flank 'em—don't let the light snag you," Kael called from the rear, his survivors

tossing covering fire that bounced off the crystals, pulverizing a bunch into biting powder. Terry dropped flat, his plasma grid stuttering to life; it surged forward in a lattice of azure blaze, dissolving three scuttlers mid-lunge, their shapes slumping into fizzing pools that corroded the floor. The squad burst into a broader chamber, walls inscribed with luminous runes that throbbed in rhythm with the leader's remote footfalls reverberating like mallet blows. Hallucinatory fire elementals rippled into existence then—whirling funnels of blaze that echoed the vein radiance, cracking out with whips that scorched without contact, compelling the eye to recoil. One coalesced before Harlan, a raging blaze that shoved him rearward, its heat blistering his bare neck and evaporating beads of sweat on contact. He reeled, sight fuzzing from the mirage's glare, but fired through it; the slugs passed futile, yet the elemental hardened mid-stride, cracking a fiery whip that nicked his arm, charring tissue to the bone and freezing his elbow in torment. Lirael scattered it with a tempestweave, gales screaming from her palms to whirl the flames into innocuous swirls, the rebound blast scattering cinders that blistered her cheeks raw. "They're baiting us—drawing fire from the real threats," she muttered, her voice laced with reproach as she glanced at Terry's gauntlet. He met her eyes, jaw clenching. "Then we adapt. Plasma overload on the cores—Elara, bind the manifests before they solidify." Elara complied, her vines slithering across the floor to entrap a budding elemental, thorns stabbing its phantom heart and ripping it asunder in bursts of fading heat. The group charged onward, rifles crackling in staccato salvos to quell scuttler hordes that surged from the veins, while Terry's lances gouged routes through pseudopod thickets, each blow leaving pits of fused glass. At the chamber's core towered an obsidian obelisk, its face laced with the same iridescent fissures as the corruption, inset with a paternal archive node—a crystalline console buzzing with dormant data. Terry edged nearer, gauntlet linking with a snap, holographic schematics unfolding in the air: blueprints for a multiversal weapon, draining volcanic breaches to escalate taint into a chain reaction across realms. The leader's scheme sharpened—tap the pocket's rage to infest Earth with weaponized veins, converting continents into spawning fields. "Father's work... twisted," Terry whispered, fingers hovering over the projection, knuckles blanching. Elara

leaned in, her breath catching as thorns from her gloves snagged on the console's rim. "This node's volatile—extracting it could overload." Lirael's hand clamped his shoulder, nails biting in. "And letting it sit hands him the keys. Your call, prodigy." He wrenched the node free, data flooding his gauntlet with a whir that escalated to a shriek. The obelisk quivered, fissures webbing as a cataclysmic surge detonated—corruption veins swelling and rupturing in fountains of black oil that splashed across the group. One stream struck a Kael survivor squarely in the torso, the erosion devouring armor and flesh in instants, leaving him wailing as he raked at melting skin before crumpling in spasms. Terry shielded Elara, the splatter striking his back and scorching through his jacket, blistering sinew in a lattice of torment that arched his spine. "Move—deeper core!" Harlan bellowed, hauling a hobbling squadmate as the chamber fractured, seismic tremors broadening breaches to infernal sub-realms below, where howls swelled like remote thunder. They bolted after the leader, threading a throbbing passage where walls oozed molten droplets, demanding vaults over expanding rifts. Pseudopods cracked anew, one looping around Lirael's ankle and dragging her toward a chasm; she blasted it with lightning, the jolt racing up her leg and deadening her foot, but Elara's vines reeled her clear, the strain ripping fresh lacerations in her palms. The core chamber gaped ahead, a pulsating nexus of veins funneling toward the leader's escape portal—a churning maelstrom of lava and shadow. Guarding it loomed a titan: a behemoth of jagged basalt fused with coiling taint, its torso a cavern of radiant fissures, arms terminating in magma hammers that dripped embers. It lumbered forward, a tread splintering the floor into a pit that engulfed a rifleman's stance; he tumbled, clawing at rims until Harlan's line hauled him up, ribs squeezing from the effort. "Converge fire—joints and vents!" Terry commanded, plasma gathering into lances that he flung at the titan's elbow, the strikes melting pivots and spraying dross that battered his visor, fracturing it with thermal strain. Elara's thorny vines exploded in a frenzy, encircling the brute's legs and cinching tight, thorns rasping into stone with shrieks that dislodged boulders from the ceiling. One chunk smashed near Lirael, the shockwave hurling her against the wall; her head whipped back, stars exploding in her sight as blood streamed from a torn scalp. Lirael

countered, tempest clouds roiling overhead to discharge forked bolts that pounded the titan's chest vents, blasts tearing inward and expelling superheated gas that singed her hair. Harlan's squad flanked, rifles crackling in harmony to lodge charges that burst in the fissures, shrapnel piercing the brute's hide like quills. Kael lobbed a grenade into a leg joint, the eruption shattering basalt into airborne fragments that gashed a squadmate's thigh, blood surging hot and swift. The titan reeled, hammers flailing wildly; one grazed Terry's shield, the impact vibrating through to rattle his teeth and snap a finger in his gauntlet hold, pain knifing keen. With a final plasma spear rammed into its core by Terry—Elara's vines forcing it ajar—the brute disintegrated, crumbling in an avalanche of debris and ichor that entombed the portal's rim. But the distortion rebound crashed like a tidal surge, space twisting inward to fling the group toward another unstable nexus threshold, limbs thrashing as the drag pulled them over the brink. Elara's hand clamped with Terry's, her grasp steel despite the blood, while Lirael arced lightning to tether them mid-fall, the discharge crackling against the void's rim. They tumbled through, the realm's roar diminishing to a vacant whoosh.

The void spat them out onto a jagged shelf of cooled lava, the impact jarring bones and scraping skin against razor-edged pumice. Terry rolled to a crouch, gauntlet servos whining as he scanned the haze—sulfurous fumes coiled thick, stinging eyes and coating throats with acrid grit. Elara landed beside him, vines retracting from her arms with a wet snap, her fingers digging into the rock to steady a knee that buckled under fresh strain. Lirael hit harder, her body skidding across embers that seared through her tunic; she gasped, the metallic tang of blood mixing with the reek of charred cloth as she pushed up, lightning flickering erratically from her palms. Harlan's squad scattered in the fallout, rifles clattering against stone. One man groaned, clutching a gash from the fall, crimson welling between fingers. Kael hauled him upright, barking orders that echoed off vaulted cavern walls veined with glowing crimson. "Form up! Eyes on the leader—he bolted that way." A distant clank of armored boots faded into the labyrinth ahead, swallowed by the rumble of shifting earth. Terry's visor flickered, recalibrating through the sulfur veil. The

shelf overlooked a warren of tubular veins, molten Riftblight pulsing like arteries through obsidian walls, bubbling black ooze that hissed on contact with air. Pseudopods erupted from the nearest one, fleshy protrusions swelling with oily shimmer before lashing out—whip-like tendrils tipped with crystalline barbs that sprayed superheated droplets. One grazed a squadmate's boot, melting sole to flesh in a sizzle that drew a muffled curse. "Flank left—seal the vein mouth!" Terry snapped, plasma coils humming in his palms. He weighed the angles: charge straight and risk the pseudopod swarm, or circle wide and lose ground on the leader. The heat radiating from the walls pressed in, sweat beading under his suit, but hesitation meant more eruptions. He thrust forward, lancing a superheated bolt into the vein's orifice; the plasma bored in with a crackle, vaporizing ooze into steam that scalded his faceplate. Elara pivoted right, summoning roots that burst from fissures—thorny coils wrapping a pseudopod mid-swing, squeezing until barbs shattered and ichor sprayed in arcs, splattering her arm with burning flecks that blistered skin. Lirael channeled a gust, wind howling to deflect incoming lashes; the air warped, carrying the pseudopods' ozone tang back at the attackers. But the effort drained her—scalp wound throbbing, vision blurring from the earlier blow. A tendril slipped through, coiling around her ankle; she yanked free with a storm surge, lightning forking down to char the appendage, the crack echoing like fracturing glass. Harlan's rifles chattered, slugs punching into the vein walls to rupture more pseudopods in geysers of slag. They pressed on, boots crunching over cooled drips that stuck like tar. Deeper in, the veins narrowed to a choking corridor, walls undulating with inner fire. Crystalline lava scuttlers skittered from cracks—fist-sized horrors of faceted quartz fused with bubbling magma, legs clicking like shattering ice as they swarmed. One latched onto a rifle barrel, mandibles grinding metal with sparks that lit the gloom. Terry dodged left, considering a plasma grid to fry the cluster versus picking them off one by one; the former risked igniting the walls, collapsing the path. He opted for precision, flicking lances that pierced shells and erupted internals in puffs of molten glass, shards ricocheting to nick his shoulder pad. Elara knelt, palms to the floor; vines snaked up, forming a barrier that impaled scuttlers mid-leap, their bodies crunching under pressure, lava cores hissing out to pool and

harden. The stench of burnt sugar intensified, mingling with the squad's sweat. Lirael swept her arms, summoning a whirlwind that hurled the creatures into walls, crystals fracturing on impact with pops that deafened ears. But hallucinations clawed in—fire elementals flickering to life in the haze, not illusions of flame but tangible assaults: waves of blistering heat that warped vision, making allies' forms twist into snarling infernos, skin prickling as if branded. One squadman clawed at his face, screaming from phantom burns that raised real welts, knees buckling under nausea that heaved his guts. "Push through—it's the blights' bleed!" Kael roared, slamming a scuttler with his rifle butt, ichor splattering his visor. They barreled onward, the leader's trail marked by disturbed slag. The corridor spat them into a chamber domed by fractured basalt, seismic tremors shaking loose pebbles that rained like hail. An obsidian obelisk thrust from the center, its surface etched with runes that glowed like cooling embers— a paternal archive node, Terry recognized from the slate's schematics. The armored leader had paused here, a holographic residue flickering before vanishing into a side vein. Terry interfaced his gauntlet, ports clicking into the stone; data streamed, volatile blueprints unfolding in his HUD: designs for harnessing volcanic rifts, channeling molten Riftblight into a multiversal weapon to tear stable nexuses apart, syndicate seals bearing his father's sigil twisted into something profane. Elara guarded his flank, eyes narrowing at the obelisk's base where fresh pseudopods stirred. "It's bait—seal it fast." Her fingers flexed, ready to bind. Lirael nodded, storm clouds gathering low, but a tremor bucked the floor—activating the node triggered a surge, obsidian cracking as energy backlash lashed out. A pulse of raw heat slammed Terry back, gauntlet smoking, circuits frying in his arm with jolts that numbed fingers. Elara staggered, vines withering under the blast, thorns drawing her own blood as they recoiled. Lirael doubled over, lightning fizzling as a migraine spiked—needles of fire lancing her skull, forcing bile to her throat. Harlan took a hit to the chest plate, cracking ribs with a gasp that wheezed blood-flecked. The leader's laughter echoed from ahead, boots pounding away. "After him—deeper veins!" Terry growled through gritted teeth, pain sharpening focus. He considered the risks: pursue narrow and single-file, easy ambush, or blast a wider path and alert more blights. The immediate goal burned clear—cut off the weapon's

core. They charged, squad limping but rifles raised. Seismic upheavals worsened, rifts widening in the walls to infernal sub-realms: glimpses of churning magma seas and howling winds that sucked air from lungs. Pseudopods renewed their assault, erupting in clusters that forced splits—Elara binding two with roots that sank into lava, steam hissing as they boiled. Scuttlers poured from the new breaches, mandibles chittering over the quakes. Hallucinatory elementals intensified, heat mirages making the ground seem to melt underfoot, boots sinking into illusory tar that burned soles raw. They rounded a bend into a vast hollow, the leader's escape portal shimmering at the far end—a vortex of twisting veins. Guarding it hulked a colossus: an immense forge-beast of petrified lava and rift-forged iron, limbs like piston rams veined with pulsing black, maw a furnace belching embers that scorched the air yards away. It charged, ground quaking with each step, fissures spiderwebbing outward. "Target the underbelly—expose the vents!" Terry assessed: direct assault meant hammer sweeps that could pulverize the squad, circling exposed them to sub-realm pulls. He rolled under a swinging arm, the whoosh rattling eardrums, and fired plasma lances upward; bolts struck the beast's gut, melting armor plates to reveal glowing fissures that vented scalding gas, singeing his hair through the suit. Elara dashed right, vines lancing out to snare a leg joint—thorns grinding into hinges with screeches that loosened chunks of stone, debris pelting her back like hail. Lirael flanked left, tempest roaring to life; lightning chains arced across the colossus's frame, bolts hammering vents to widen them, explosions of superheated slag spraying that forced her to dive, shoulder bruising on impact. Harlan's squad poured fire, slugs burrowing into joints to lodge and detonate, shrapnel carving gashes that oozed molten ichor. Kael hurled charges into the maw, the blasts erupting inward and cracking the jaw with a boom that deafened, fragments embedding in a squadmate's leg, drawing a hiss of pain. The colossus bellowed, a roar like cracking magma, rams flailing to crush a rifleman against the wall—bones snapping with a wet crunch, blood pooling amid the rubble. Terry pressed the advantage, plasma spear forming in his good hand; he leaped onto a fallen boulder, aiming for the core vent Elara's vines pried open. The strike connected, energy surging through to fracture the beast from within—lava

erupting in geysers that bathed the chamber, heat waves buckling knees. It toppled, the crash widening rifts further, sub-realm winds howling to drag at clothing. But the portal destabilized in backlash, space folding like crumpled foil to yank the group inward. Terry grabbed Elara's wrist, her pulse racing under his grip, as Lirael's lightning tether snapped taut against the pull. They hurtled toward the threshold, the leader's silhouette vanishing ahead, boots kicking against the void's inexorable tug.

The void's grasp wrenched like a clamp, compressing chests as the group tumbled through the crumpling breach. Boots grated against unseen drag, sparks erupting from Terry's suit as he braced his plasma emitter against the drag. They spilled out onto jagged obsidian, the portal clamping shut behind with a thunderclap that rattled ribs. Sulfur clogged the air, dense as pitch, while veins of molten corruption snaked across the cavern floor—glowing black rivers that seethed and sizzled, spitting oily droplets that sizzled on contact. Terry hit the ground rolling, shoulder slamming against a basalt spike that deadened his arm to the elbow. He probed: labyrinthine tunnels branched ahead, walls throbbing with embedded crystals that splintered heat haze. The leader's armored form darted into the leftmost vein, pauldrons gleaming under lava glow. "That way—flank the curves!" Terry bellowed, pushing up despite the ache in his joints. Straight charge risked pseudopod ambushes from the walls; looping wide invited scuttler swarms from ceiling crevices. He chose the vein's edge, boots grinding cooled slag. Elara landed beside him, vines retracting from her wrists with a wet snap. She winced, clutching her side where debris had gashed her ribs—each breath wrenching a shallow gasp. "He's gaining ground. Those veins... they're alive." Her fingers dug into a pouch, crushing herbs into a hasty poultice she smeared over the wound, the scent slicing through the brimstone. Lirael skidded to a halt, lightning coiling around her fists like serpents ready to strike. Her ankle twisted on landing, sending a spike of pain that made her grit teeth, but she shook it off, emerald gaze sharpening on the leader's fading echo. Harlan's squad fanned out behind, rifles sweeping shadows; Kael limped from a shrapnel graze, blood crusting his thigh, but he nodded readiness. One rifleman lagged, leg bandaged from the titan fight, his steps hitching on the uneven floor. The vein

narrowed, walls closing like heated jaws. A pseudopod burst from the left— a thick, oily tentacle studded with crystalline barbs, cracking toward Elara's flank. She twisted, conjuring thorny roots that thrust from the ground in a tangle; they coiled around the limb, thorns piercing to pump acidic sap that bubbled the surface, black ichor spraying in arcs that ate pits into nearby stone. The pseudopod flailed, slamming her against the wall—her elbow cracking audibly, vision blurring from the impact. Terry fired a plasma lance, the bolt searing blue-white as it vaporized the base, steam hissing upward in a scalding plume that forced him to shield his face, skin prickling raw. "Keep moving—don't cluster!" He gauged options: bolt ahead to cut off the leader, or clear the rear for the squad? Rear threats could pick off the wounded; he pivoted, emitter buzzing to life for suppressive fire. Crystalline lava scuttlers clattered from ceiling fissures—fist-sized abominations with molten cores, legs like glowing needles that pierced stone. One clamped onto a squadman's boot, injecting heat that blistered flesh through the sole; he stomped it flat, the crunch releasing a burst of lava that splashed his calf, drawing a curse as muscle seized. Lirael unleashed a tempestweave, gale howling to whip the swarm into a maelstrom; lightning forked through, shattering shells in explosions of superheated shards that peppered the group, one nicking Harlan's cheek to carve a bloody furrow. They forged ahead deeper, the vein widening into a chamber laced with throbbing black lines. Hallucinatory fire elementals rippled into existence—ethereal flames shaping into humanoid torsos with clawing arms, heat mirages solidifying into whips that cracked out. One caught Kael across the chest, the strike singeing fabric and blistering skin in raised welts that blistered instantly, forcing him to drop a charge mid-throw. His squad covered, rifles crackling slugs that punched through illusions, dissipating them in puffs of acrid smoke that stung eyes. Elara's vines lashed a cluster, thorns igniting on contact to consume the forms in roaring blazes, embers drifting to singe hair. But the effort drained her; sweat beaded on her brow, mixing with soot. Terry's tactical probe locked on an obsidian obelisk at the chamber's core—tall as three men, etched with Nexus runes that buzzed faintly. "There—archive node. Father's mark." He dashed forward, boots sliding on slick ichor, emitter slung to free his hands. Peril: activating it mid-pursuit

could draw more guardians. Gain: intel on the leader's endgame. He interfaced his gauntlet, runes syncing with a spark. Holograms unfolded—volatile schematics of breach harnesses, volcanic vents drained into weapon cores. The leader's voice reverberated in the projection: "These breaches will birth a multiversal scourge—corruption forged into blades that corrupt worlds." Terry's jaw clenched, gauntlet clenching the console edge until servos whirred. Elara leaned in, her unbound hand steadying on his shoulder, pulse steady despite the pain carving lines around her eyes. Lirael guarded the flank, tempestweave crackling. "It's a beacon array. Harness the heat to amplify breaches—turn pockets like this into invasion gates." Harlan's squad formed a perimeter, rifles trained on tunnel mouths, one man reloading with fingers slick from sweat. Terry downloaded the files, the obelisk quivering under his touch. But the activation triggered a cataclysmic surge—veins along the walls rupturing in geysers of molten black, the floor lurching like a living beast. A pressure wave slammed into them, hurling Terry backward; he crashed into a stalagmite, the impact jarring his spine with a crack that stole his breath, vision spotting black. Elara skidded across the ground, vines whipping to anchor her, but a glob of ichor hit her leg, corroding boot leather and searing skin in bubbling welts that made her stifle a scream. Lirael staggered, lightning fizzling as the surge shorted her weave; a pseudopod nicked her arm, barbs raking deep gashes that wept blood in hot rivulets, forcing her to clutch it close. Harlan bellowed orders, squad scattering as scuttlers poured from fresh cracks—bullets felled a dozen, casings clattering amid the roar, but one elemental clamped onto a rifleman's back, flames charring muscle until he collapsed, rolling to smother it in a writhe of agony. "The core—deeper vein!" Terry gasped, forcing upright, ribs protesting with fire. The leader's trail led into a throbbing maw ahead, seismic tremors broadening side breaches to infernal sub-realms—glowing cracks spewing ash and distant howls. They charged, plasma lances gouging paths through pseudopods that reared like cobras, vines entangling scuttlers into crushing knots, lightning storms vaporizing elementals in thunderous bursts that left craters smoking. Deeper, the core chamber gaped: a titanic guardian titan barred the escape portal, body a hulking mass of breach-forged basalt and lava veins, eyes like forge vents glaring red. Its arms ended

in hammer fists that pulverized stone with each swing, ground splintering into chasms. The leader's silhouette slipped behind it, portal irising open with a whir. "Target joints—breach the core!" Terry commanded, assessing: frontal assault invited sweeping arcs that could flatten the group; indirect meant navigating chasms risking sub-realm falls. He flanked right, plasma grid deploying in a rippling barrier that deflected a fist's graze—the impact buckled the shield, shock rippling up his arms to numb fingers. Elara conjured entangling roots from the floor, thorns burrowing into leg joints with grinding cracks, loosening plates that shed molten flakes scorching her arms like acid rain. Lirael circled left, tempest building to hurl lightning spears; they struck the chest, arcing through veins to erupt slag in fountains that forced her to leap back, landing hard on her wounded ankle with a pop that buckled her knee. Harlan's squad unleashed volleys, slugs embedding in fissures to detonate inward, carving chunks that tumbled like boulders, one clipping Kael's shoulder and dislocating it with a grind of bone. The titan bellowed, magma breath washing the air in waves that blistered exposed skin, driving the group to cover behind rubble. Terry leaped onto a vein outcrop, emitter overcharging for a spear thrust—it pierced the core, energy fracturing the mass in a cascade of exploding stone. The guardian disintegrated, debris avalanching to bury scuttlers and elementals alike, dust choking the air with the tang of scorched metal. But the portal's backlash distorted, space warping like heated glass to hurl them forward. Terry snagged Elara's arm, her weight dragging as they spun toward the threshold. Lirael's tether lashed out, but a fresh tremor split the floor— A sub-realm claw, vast and barbed, burst from the broadening breach below.

Chapter 9: Claws from the Sub-Realm

The ground lurched beneath their boots, a guttural rumble rising from the obsidian-cracked earth like the planet's own labored breath. Sulfurous fumes clawed at Terry's throat, thick with the acrid tang of brimstone and charred bone, while the crimson sky overhead boiled in perpetual fury, veins of lava threading through clouds that spat embers like angry stars. Obsidian rafts

drifted on rivers of sluggish magma, their edges glowing white-hot, and distant reptilian shadows slithered across them, hissing scales scraping stone. The air hung heavy, gravity pulling with a sluggish insistence that made every step feel like wading through tar. From the widening breach—a jagged maw fringed with pulsating corruption veins—the titanic claw burst forth. It was a nightmare forged of sub-realm depths: enormous, segmented like a scorpion's tail, armored in jagged crystalline plates that shimmered with trapped heat. Tendrils of oily ichor whipped from its joints, each lash spraying mutagenic sludge that sizzled on contact with the ground, birthing swarms of lava-scuttling minions—chittering horrors with obsidian shells and molten eyes, their legs skittering like heated nails on iron. "Target the joints!" Terry bellowed, his voice slicing through the roar of erupting geysers. He thrust his palms forward, Nexus-weave circuits in his gauntlets buzzing to life. Lances of superheated plasma streaked from his fingertips, azure bolts slamming into the claw's elbow hinge. The impact vaporized a chunk of crystal, sending shards flying like shrapnel, but the limb regenerated in pulses of glowing ichor, fibers knitting with wet, tearing sounds. Elara Voss pivoted beside him, her fingers digging into the ashen soil. Thorny vines burst from the ground in a tangle of barbed green, coiling around a cluster of scuttlers that lunged from a steaming fissure. The plants crushed their shells with a series of sharp cracks, ichor oozing like boiling tar, but one minion latched onto her boot, its mandibles grinding through leather. She stomped it flat, grinding her heel with a grimace that twisted her lips—doubt flickering in the set of her jaw as she glanced at Terry's plasma barrage. "Those lances are carving paths, but they're just growing back stronger. We need to choke the source." Lirael Thorne didn't waste breath on words. She raised her arms, stormweave crackling in the humid air, and unleashed a torrent of lightning that arced across the claw's length. Bolts forked into the regenerative pulses, disrupting the ichor flow with explosive pops, like fireworks in a thunderhead. The electricity danced over the crystalline surface, shattering a tendril mid-swing and hurling globs of mutagenic fluid that splattered a squad member from Harlan's team. The soldier staggered, his arm blistering not with burns but with bubbling mutations—flesh warping into spiky protrusions that forced him to clutch it rigid, veins bulging as he fought the urge

to claw at his own skin. Harlan himself, grizzled and scarred, leveled his breach-rifle from a crouch behind an obsidian outcrop. "Flank it—suppress the swarms!" he bellowed, his shots crackling in rapid bursts, each round laced with kinetic pulses that pulped scuttlers mid-scuttle, their bodies erupting in sprays of molten fragments. But the claw retaliated, slamming down with earth-shaking force. The impact hurled Terry sideways, his shoulder clipping a jagged rock that split skin and sent a jolt of fire through his nerves, numbing his left arm to the elbow. The team scattered as the claw's tendrils lashed wildly, summoning more minions from bubbling pools. One vine-wrapped scuttler exploded under Elara's grip, its innards spraying her face with scorching flecks that seared like acid, leaving red welts that throbbed with every heartbeat. She wiped them away with the back of her hand, her eyes narrowing in a brief, assessing flick toward Lirael. "Your storms are scattering them—keep it up, but watch the ichor spray." Deeper into the labyrinth they forged ahead, the sub-realm's walls closing like heated jaws, veins of corruption throbbing along the basalt corridors. Seismic tremors rocked the floor, fissures belching superheated gas that singed hair and blistered exposed skin. Delirious assaults flickered at the edges of vision—phantom flames licking at boots, illusory scuttlers nipping at heels with bites that felt all too real, drawing pinpricks of blood before dissolving into ash. Mid-stride, Terry yanked a data slate from his belt, its holographic emitter stuttering to life amid the chaos. He dodged a tendril swipe that gouged the wall beside him, carving a furrow deep enough to expose glowing innards of the realm. The projection bloomed: blueprints of a corruption-weaponizing device, schematics pulsing with forbidden Nexus-weave patterns. His father's signature scrolled across the overlay, intertwined with syndicate codes—the armored leader's handiwork, a plot to harness corruption as a multiversal plague. Terry's jaw clenched, knuckles blanching on the slate as he interfaced it with his gauntlet, downloading the files in a rush of data streams. Determination etched in the rigid line of his shoulders, he shoved the device back and fired another plasma lance, the bolt searing deeper this time, cauterizing a joint with a sizzle of evaporating ichor. "Got the proof—it's real," he growled, voice steady despite the quake that nearly buckled his knees. A hallucinatory swarm buzzed around Lirael,

phantom insects burrowing into her skin with illusory stings that left her swatting wildly, a sharp hiss escaping her teeth as she disrupted them with a gale of windweave. Harlan's squad laid down covering fire, one rifleman taking a glancing tendril hit that didn't cut but compressed his chest like a vice, ribs creaking audibly as he wheezed, dropping to one knee with a pained grunt. "Forge ahead—the breach is widening!" Elara summoned a thicker barrier of vines, weaving them into a net that snared the claw's primary segment, thorns piercing crystal with grinding crunches. Lirael's lightning chained through the bindings, supercharging the plants to conduct surges that fried regenerative nodes, the air filling with the ozone bite of electrocution and the sickly sweet char of overripe fruit from the burnt-sugar stench of corruption. Terry layered his plasma grid over it all, a fused Nexus-weave that buzzed with converted mana, the energies colliding in a blaze of blue-white fury. The claw thrashed, its enormous bulk convulsing as the weave took hold. Joints popped under the strain, ichor fountains geysering skyward before solidifying into brittle spikes that shattered on the ground. Minions swarmed in desperation, only to be pulped by Harlan's barrage—shells cracking like eggshells, lava innards spilling in steaming pools that warped the stone into grotesque, fleshy ridges. With a final, resonant bellow that vibrated through bones and set teeth rattling, the claw retracted into the breach, the wound sealing in a convulsion of collapsing edges. Chunks of crystal rained down, one grazing Elara's thigh and pinning her momentarily, the weight bruising muscle deep enough to hobble her stride, forcing a stifled curse as she shoved it free. But victory curdled as the armored leader—cloaked in shadowed exosuit plates—emerged from a side alcove, gauntlet raised. "You delay the inevitable," he sneered, voice modulated through a grille, activating a secondary portal with a surge of breach-energy. The vortex yawned open, a swirling maw of frost-rimed darkness that tugged at the air, pulling grit and embers into its howling core. The pull yanked Terry forward first, his boots skidding on ashen scree. Elara lunged to grab his arm, but the suction tore her loose, slamming her against Lirael. Harlan bellowed orders, squad members firing grapples that snapped taut—only for the lines to fray against the portal's edge. One by one, they tumbled in, the volcanic heat giving way to a biting chill that clawed at lungs.

They spilled out onto a frozen expanse, crystalline petals of ice blooming underfoot, the sky a bruised indigo swirling with snowflake gales. Distant bellows echoed from steaming oases, where towering shapes stirred in the geothermal haze—a new sub-realm, teeming with frozen abominations that turned toward the intruders with resonant, shattering cries. Terry rolled to his feet, plasma gauntlets reigniting with a spark, as the first frost-laced tendril snaked from the snow.

Terry's gauntlets buzzed, arcs of plasma coiling around his fists like serpents ready to strike. The tendril—thick as a thigh, veined with frost-crusted crystal—whipped toward him, trailing a spray of needle-sharp ice shards that sliced the air with a high-pitched whine. He pivoted left, boots crunching into the brittle snowpack, gauging the split-second choices: dive right into the open drift where visibility plunged to zero, or lunge forward and risk the tendril's coil trapping his legs. The pressing goal burned clear—sever the damn thing before it conjured more from the drifts. He chose the lunge, thrusting both arms out as he rolled under the lash. Plasma pierced forth in twin beams, superheated blue-white streaks that met the tendril mid-swing. Flesh and crystal vaporized in a sizzle of steam, the severed end flailing wildly before collapsing in a heap of twitching segments, ichor bubbling out to freeze into jagged spikes that pierced the ground like caltrops. Elara staggered up beside him, her thigh wound from the crystal chunk throbbing with each step, blood seeping through torn fabric to stain the snow crimson. She gripped her staff, knuckles blanching as she surveyed the horizon—towering ice spires loomed like broken teeth, and in the steaming oases where geothermal vents punched through the permafrost, hulking silhouettes lumbered, their forms a grotesque fusion of corruption and frost: limbs armored in hoarfrost plates, eyes glowing with inner taint that smelled of ozone laced with the cloying rot of decayed vegetation. "Flank the oases," she bellowed, voice steady despite the limp, her free hand already weaving patterns in the air. Vines erupted from her staff's tip, not the lush green of her homeland but twisted, thorn-ridged creepers adapted to the chill, burrowing into the frozen soil with audible cracks. They snaked toward the nearest abomination, a quadruped brute with a maw of crystalline fangs, aiming to ensnare its forelegs and

yank it off balance. But the peril gnawed at her—the vines could shatter in this cold, leaving her exposed to a charge that would pulverize bone. Lirael shook snow from her cloak, her breath fogging in ragged bursts, the portal's chill still biting into her lungs like swallowed glass. She crouched low, fingers splayed toward the sky, assessing the winds: channel a gale to scatter the shards or focus it into a bolt to crack the spires and bury the threats under avalanches. The tangible goal pressed—clear a path to that glowing console half-buried in the drift ahead, its holographic emitter flickering with archived data they couldn't afford to lose. She opted for the bolt, conjuring a tempestweave that crackled with raw electricity. A torrent of lightning forked down, slamming into the tendril's stump with a thunderclap that shook loose powder from the spires, the impact fusing crystal to slag in a shower of molten droplets that sizzled on the ice. Harlan's squad fanned out behind them, rifles crackling in staccato bursts, the recoil jolting their shoulders as slugs punched into the snow, sending up geysers of white. One soldier, Reyes, clipped a minion—a scuttling horror resembling a crab fused with blackened ice, its legs clicking like shattering glass—as it burrowed from the drift. The round cored through its shell, spilling viscous fluid that steamed and warped the snow into fleshy protrusions, the stench hitting like a punch: burnt-sugar stench mingled with the metallic tang of blood. "Eyes on the vents!" Harlan bellowed, his voice slicing through the gale, as he fired a burst that stitched across an abomination's flank, chipping away frost armor to reveal pulsating veins beneath. The first wave crashed hard. From the oases, abominations charged—titanic beasts with hides like glacial crevasses, their steps quaking the ground in rhythmic tremors that sent fissures spiderwebbing outward. One barreled toward Elara, its crystalline horns lowered, exhaling a blast of supercooled mist that flash-froze the air into razor-edged fog. She twisted aside, the mist grazing her arm and numbing skin to the elbow, but her vines latched on, thorns digging into joints with wet pops. The brute reared, straining against the bind, muscles bulging as it tried to trample her. Terry saw the pinch—Elara's position exposed her to a stomp that could cave her chest—and fired a plasma lance across the expanse, the beam carving a smoking furrow through the beast's side. Ichor sprayed, corrosive droplets eating into the ice and

forcing Terry to leap back, the acid's fizz burning through his boot sole to blister flesh. Swarms followed, smaller fiends skittering on needle legs, their bodies pulsing with inner light that cast erratic shadows across the snow. Lirael unleashed another tempest, gales howling as they hurled the crawlers into spires, shells cracking on impact with sounds like breaking porcelain. But one latched onto a squad member's leg, its mandibles injecting ichor that spread black veins up the calf, the soldier howling as convulsions wracked him, dropping to his knees in the snow. Harlan hauled him back, applying a field cauterizer that seared the limb with a sizzle of flesh, the smell of charred meat overriding the ozone for a heartbeat. Amid the fray, Terry spotted the console, its emitter pulsing like a heartbeat buried under a drift. He dashed toward it, plasma shield flickering to life—a kinetic barrier that warped the air with heat haze—deflecting a hail of ice needles that pinged off it like hail on metal. The peril loomed: the drift could collapse under him, burying him alive, or a tendril could erupt from below. Goal sharp—interface and download before the next surge. He slammed a gauntlet into the snow, Runic Programming activating with a glyph that interfaced seamlessly, the console whirring to life. Holograms bloomed in the air, blueprints unfurling like spectral scrolls: schematics for a device called the Aetherforge, a Nexus-weave engine designed to amplify corruption into weaponized payloads, veins of taint channeled through mana converters. The projections shifted, logs materializing—Terry's father's voice, grainy but unmistakable, narrating from years past. "The Sundering wasn't chaos; it was opportunity. Stabilize the taint, weaponize its mutations..." The armored leader's syndicate emblem flashed, linking the tech to covert ops across fractured Earth. Terry's jaw clenched, fingers clenching the console edge until plasteel creaked, fueling a surge in his weave as he downloaded the files, the data stream buzzing through his implants like electric fire. But the archives stirred the sub-realm's defenses. Delirious assaults bombarded them—not whispers, but tangible onslaughts: vivid scents of smoke choked the air where none burned, forcing Reyes to claw at his throat, coughing as phantom embers seared his lungs. Elara reeled, seeing vines twist into serpents that coiled around her staff, the illusion so solid she slashed at them, thorns drawing real blood from her palms. Lirael staggered, knees buckling under a wave of

nausea that twisted her gut, the ground seeming to heave like a living thing, while screams reverberated from nowhere, mimicking fallen squad mates to draw her fire wide. Seismic tremors rocked the expanse, fissures yawning to belch steam that scalded exposed skin. A titanic claw—sibling to the volcanic one, now sheathed in glacial armor—burst from a central breach, tendrils of ichor-laced ice cracking out, conjuring fresh swarms from the depths. It crushed a spire in its grip, debris raining down in boulders that thudded into the snow, one glancing off Harlan's shoulder and spinning him into a drift. Terry pulled back from the console, data secured, determination hardening his stance as he eyed the claw's joints—vulnerable hinges pulsing with taint. "Bind it low!" he snapped, layering plasma over Elara's vines as she extended them, the creepers wrapping the base with barbs that sank deep, drawing bellows from the brute that vibrated through the ice like a drum. Lirael channeled her tempest, lightning arcing in chains that danced across the tendrils, disrupting the regenerative pulses with bursts of superheated vapor. The squad poured fire, slugs ricocheting off armor but chipping away at edges, exposing raw flesh that wept ichor. The claw thrashed, scattering the group—Elara tumbled into a fissure, her wounded leg catching on a ledge, while a tendril grazed Terry's shield, the impact jarring his arms numb. They forged ahead, severing limbs in sprays of frozen gore, the air thick with the screech of crystal on crystal and the acrid bite of plasma-scorched ice. In a final push, Terry fused his Nexus-weave, plasma grid merging with Lirael's lightning and Elara's vines in a titanic lattice that enveloped the claw. Energies collided in a roar of thunder and blaze, joints fracturing under the strain, the brute's bulk convulsing as it retracted into the breach. The seal held, edges collapsing in a cascade of crumbling frost, but triumph shattered as the armored leader's voice reverberated from a new alcove, gauntlet igniting another portal—a maelstrom of swirling shadows that yanked at their forms once more. The pull dragged them toward it, boots carving furrows in the snow, as frozen abominations stirred anew from the oases, their cries shattering the air like breaking glass. Terry fired a parting lance, vaporizing a pursuing tendril, while Elara hauled Lirael upright, the trio tumbling into the maw as Harlan's squad grappled for purchase. The icy chill gave way to an unknown void, spilling them onto...

. . . a jagged forge floor of blackened iron, the air slamming into them like a furnace blast. Steam hissed from grates beneath, carrying the tang of molten metal and charred herbs—ozone undercut by something sweeter, like scorched caramel twisting into rot. Terry rolled to his knees, boots scraping against riveted plates that groaned under the weight, his plasma emitter buzzing hot in his grip. The portal's maelstrom spat out the rest in a tangle: Elara landed crouched, vines coiling protectively around her legs as she surveyed the gloom; Lirael hit hard, shoulder smashing into a pillar that sparked with charged particles, static prickling her skin like invisible needles, her chest heaving from the drag. Harlan's squad tumbled in last, one grunt cursing as his rifle clattered across the deck, another hauling up a comrade whose arm dangled limp from the earlier scatter. The chamber stretched immense, walls inscribed with glowing runes that throbbed like veins, forges lining the edges where hammers lay abandoned mid-swing, flames licking at half-melted ingots. Shadows writhed from bellows that wheezed on their own, expelling gusts that warped the heat into mirages—faint outlines of figures hammering away, dissolving into haze. But no time to gawk. A low rumble swelled from the far end, the floor vibrating as cracks splintered outward, oily black seepage bubbling up to crystallize into thorns that rasped against the iron. "Regroup!" Terry bellowed, thumbing his emitter to charge, blue arcs flickering along its barrel. He glanced at Elara, her face smeared with frost melt, jaw clenched in that stubborn line she got before arguing a plan. "Vines on the cracks—stem the spread before it hardens." Elara nodded sharp, but her emerald gaze sharpened to Lirael, who was pushing upright with a wince, fingers flexing around her stormstaff. "And your plasma? It'll superheat the corruption, make it explode shards everywhere." Her voice sharpened with accusation under the tactic, hand already weaving gestures that conjured roots from the seams, thorn-ridged creepers snaking out to clamp the bubbling fissures with wet snaps. Lirael spat a glob of blood-tinged ice, tempestweave crackling at her fingertips. "Better than letting it root. Terry, probe the runes—they're not just decorative. Could be a forge nexus, powering this whole pit." She didn't meet his gaze, instead conjuring a gale that scattered the steam, revealing a central anvil inscribed with holographic emitters, dormant but

buzzing faintly. Harlan staggered up, clapping his squad into formation with bellowed gestures, rifles sweeping the murk. “Eyes open, people. That leader’s not far—portal like that doesn’t spit us out random.” One of his grunts, a wiry woman with a scarred cheek, knelt by the anvil, prying at a panel. It sizzled open, projecting a shimmer of light: blueprints unfolding in the air, schematics of interlocking gears and rune circuits, labeled in stark code—‘Aetherium Stabilizer Variant: Corruption Infusion Protocol.’ Terry lunged forward, shoving past the grunt to interface his gauntlet, data surging through his visor. Lines of code scrolled, tying back to paternal archives they’d glimpsed before—his father’s hand, no doubt, twisting Nexus-weaves into something weaponized. The corruption wasn’t just a scar; it was fuel, meant to be harvested, amplified into bombs that could breach entire cities. “This... it’s the core. The syndicate’s building an engine here, to pump the corruption multiversal.” His voice tightened, fist clenching the edge of the anvil until the metal dented under his glove. Elara’s vines thickened, barbs digging into the crystallizing ooze, but the ground lurched—a titanic forge hammer animating from the wall, its head swelling with tumorous spikes as corruption fused iron to pulsating flesh. It swung down in a whoosh that displaced air, slamming where the squad had stood a heartbeat before. Harlan dove, rolling as slugs from his rifle peppered the haft, sparks flying where rounds bit into corrupted alloy. “Contact! Heavy construct—aim for the joints!” The hammer retracted, only for the floor to burst nearby, a swarm of scuttlers bursting free—chitinous horrors the size of hounds, their shells veined with glowing lava cracks, mandibles clicking in a chorus that reverberated like shattering glass. One latched onto a squad member’s boot, acidic drool sizzling through leather, drawing a yelp as flesh bubbled. Lirael unleashed a bolt, electricity forking into the pack, bodies convulsing in sprays of molten innards that sizzled on the plates, the burnt-sugar stench sharpening the air. Terry pivoted, piercing plasma into the hammer’s elbow, superheated beam melting the joint in a gout of steam and slag. The construct bellowed—a guttural roar that vibrated eardrums, sending ripples through the steam. But as it toppled, tendrils whipped from its base, slick with ichor that trailed crystallization, wrapping Elara’s ankle and yanking her toward a grate. She twisted mid-air, conjuring a burst of

thorns that pierced the appendage, black fluid spurting in arcs that corroded the iron where it landed, pitting it like acid rain. "Got the schematics downloading," Terry called, visor flaring as files flooded in—logs detailing infusions, tests on captured breaches, the leader's syndicate marked with a coiled serpent glyph. His father's notes flickered: 'Precision over chaos. The Sundering's legacy can be tamed.' But underlined, a warning: 'At what cost to the weaver?' Doubt flickered in Terry's gut, but he shoved it down, sealing the transfer with a gauntlet slam. "It's tied to the academy breach—Prince lineage all over it. We destroy this forge, we cripple their weapon." Lirael staggered as a scuttler lunged, her gale hurling it into a wall where it burst like overripe fruit, shards embedding in her arm with pinpricks of pain. "Your lineage, you mean. Harlan, cover the flanks—those projections are wrong." She nodded toward the shadows, where faint voices mimicked their own—Terry's snap from moments ago, Elara's warning, twisted into pleas for help that bounced off the walls, disorienting the squad. One grunt froze, rifle dipping as a phantom cry of his name pulled him toward a pit, only for Harlan to yank him back by the collar. "Projection Mimics," Elara hissed, recognizing the distortion from old tales, her vines lashing out blindly into the murk, snagging a smoky form that shattered into mirrors, shards tinkling across the floor. The mimic's face fractured mid-scream, reflecting her own horrified expression back a thousandfold before it dissolved. "They feed on the noise—quiet your fire, or they'll swarm." But quiet wasn't an option. The anvil flared, runes igniting as the leader's voice boomed from hidden vents—metallic, amplified. "Fools. The forge awakens." The central platform heaved, a sub-realm claw erupting not from ice but forged depths, its digits wrought of hammered corruption-iron, claws raking furrows that spewed sparks and ooze. It clamped down on the anvil's edge, crushing the hologram in a crunch of circuits, data streams fracturing like glass. Terry fired first, plasma piercing the palm, boring a crater that wept molten tears. "Elara, bind the wrist—Lirael, overload the runes!" Elara extended her creepers, barbs hooking into gaps where flesh met metal, hauling tight with a creak of straining fibers. The claw flexed, barbs snapping like twigs, but it slowed, ichor bubbling from wounds to harden into spikes that pierced her vines in retaliation. Lirael conjured her tempest, bolts chain-

ing along the inscribed walls, supercharging the runes until they overloaded in bursts of azure fire, the claw's arm jerking spasmodically. Harlan's squad advanced, pulse rifles crackling—kinetic rounds thudding into the forearm, tempestweave bolts arcing to detonate in blooms of electricity that charred the surface, exposing writhing underskin. A grunt took a swipe, armor crumpling as he flew into a bellows, the impact wheezing air from his lungs in a bloody cough. Terry intensified the assault, layering a grid that fused with Lirael's surges, energies weaving a net that seared into the joint. The claw flailed, slamming the floor and sending squad members sprawling, one vanishing into a fresh fissure with a scream cut short by cracking stone. Fractures spread— not just in the claw, but the group. Elara yanked her vines free, scorched ends smoking, and shot Terry a glare over the din. "Your father's toy is pulling us apart. We seal it, or it claims more." Her words bit, fingers trembling as she staunched a gash on Lirael's arm, the herbalist's touch blooming faint green light amid the chaos. Lirael grunted, shoving off the aid to loose another chain, her stance widening against the lurch. "Seal it how? Your weaves are drawing it out, Terry—like bait." Accusation hung, but she funneled the tempest anyway, lightning grounding through the claw in a thunderclap that buckled its digits. The brute convulsed, ichor flooding the deck in a tide that corroded boots and weapons, the smell choking—ozone laced with that insidious sweet decay. Terry overrode the doubt, gauntlet interfacing a nearby rune mid-lunge, rerouting the forge's power into a feedback loop. Plasma surged through the lines, igniting the claw from within, alloys glowing white-hot as they warped and split. With a final roar that shook rivets loose, the appendage retracted, the breach sealing in a sizzle of steam and collapsing slag. Chest heaving, Terry straightened, but the victory curdled. Holographic remnants flickered on the anvil's ruins—final logs from his father, voice gravelly: 'The syndicate twists my work. Stop them, son, before the corruption claims the forge... and us.' The chamber trembled anew, forges belching smoke as alliances strained—Harlan bellowing orders to his wounded, Elara coiling vines defensively, Lirael eyeing Terry with unspoken fracture. From the depths, a fresh rumble swelled, icy winds seeping through cracks, hinting at the next sub-realm's stir. Terry holstered his emitter, resolve steeling as he traced the

schematics' escape vector—a side vent pulsating with shadow. "We pursue. End this at the source." He stepped forward, the group falling in uneasy step, boots echoing into the gloom.

The vent's maw engulfed them, a jagged gullet of rusted metal and throbbing veins that compressed the air from Terry's chest. He spearheaded the crawl, gauntlet grinding against the walls to anchor the weave, sparks stuttering in the gloom. Behind, Elara's breath grated, her pack catching on a crystal spur that she tore loose with a stifled oath. Lirael trailed, her elbow jarring Harlan's helm in the crush, drawing a guttural grunt from the instructor as his squad squeezed in last—boots thudding, rifles rattling. Frost clawed at their heels first, a seeping cold that congealed sweat into rime on skin. The sulfur fog dissipated, supplanted by a razor gale that bore the bite of glacial runoff and something keener: fossilized decay, like primordial bones scraping beneath soles. Terry's visor misted, readings surging—temperature diving, breach distortions twisting the passage into a corkscrew plunge. He drove a plasma cutter into the rim ahead, the ray carving a hatch with a sizzle of vaporized steam that momentarily thawed the crawlspace. They spilled into a cavern of rime and obscurity, soles grinding on fragile ice that latticed the floor like splintered quartz. Towering pinnacles of frozen taint towered, their facets laced with slick black that defied coagulation, oozing in sluggish, syrupy drops. The atmosphere buzzed with a deep thrum, as if the sub-realm itself inhaled, expelling squalls that lashed bare skin. Terry sprang upright, emitter buzzing to life, bathing the team in azure light as they dispersed, weapons primed. Harlan bellowed a perimeter command, his squad progressing in an offset phalanx, rays from their rifles slashing the haze to reveal scuttling forms on the fringes—pallid, jointed terrors with appendages like frost shards, their husks fracturing as they skittered nearer. "Flank left! Don't let 'em hem us!" One marksman dropped to a knee, optic gleaming, and launched a kinetic slug that pulverized a scuttler's forelimb, flinging it end over end in a burst of iced splinters that pattered like sleet. Elara hunkered by a protruding floe, digits clawing into the glacial shell to summon roots through the tundra. Barbed lianas burst forth, encircling a pouncing monstrosity and compressing until its carapace ruptured with a sodden snap, taint crystallizing mid-ejection into ebony needles.

She shot Terry a look, brushing rime from her forehead with a cuff rigidifying in the freeze. “These fiends reform in the cold—your plasma’s the sole purge that’ll erase ’em outright. Strike the hearts, or we’re merely trimming brush.” Her command bore authority, no entreaty, just the bowman’s evaluation as she drew a shaft inscribed with luminous sigils, propelling it into another’s gut where it embedded and unfurled a defiant emerald patch, defrosting the taint in hissing streams. Lirael, jaws locked against the gale’s wail, summoned a blast that catapulted a pack of scuttlers into a barrier, their frames exploding on collision. She reeled as a rebound surge struck, legs folding under a nausea tide that knotted her innards like razor cord—spectral frosts infiltrating her arteries, blurring her sight with sham blizzards. “The atmosphere’s tainted with it,” she grated, dispelling it with a stamp that fissured the glaze below. “Press through the dune forward—it’s sparser there, scant shelter for traps.” Terry inclined his head, quelling the team’s disquiet with a gauntlet sweep that unfurled a kinetic dome, the veil rippling as it repelled a volley of glacial barbs that lodged in the force wall with crisp fractures. The sub-realm retaliated, the terrain undulating in waves that compelled them to lurch, clutching at iced protrusions glazed with hoar. One trooper’s sole skidded into a rift, the split expanding with a creak, and Harlan pounced, dragging him clear by the tether as the void clamped in a puff of flakes. Farther along, the maze coiled into a hall of glacial vaults, their domes moaning beneath the burden of dangling taint—enormous bulbs of slick black imprisoned in limpid ice, throbbing subtly like organs in stasis. A plinth console hunkered at the hall’s core, partially interred in a floe, its holographic projector sputtering cerulean specters that cavorted across the rime. Terry cleared a stress ridge, alighting with a skid that propelled him toward the apparatus, emitter linking mid-glide to extract diagrams from the quartz nucleus. Displays ignited: schematics of a nexus anvil, contorted into an arm that drained breach-taint into viral warheads, conduits of script tying to his father’s mark—trials corrupted by syndicate grasp. The armored leader’s timbre reverberated in the records, warped: “Prince’s concepts will spawn a legion. Indestructible, infinite.” Terry’s jaw clenched, digits gripping the plinth’s rim until rime gnawed his knuckles, but a shudder rattled the hall, unleashing a bulb

that plunged, exploding on the deck and spawning a frenzy of quartz crawlers. The horde detonated in a rage, their limbs scraping like fracturing quartz as they swarmed, jaws oozing mutagen that fizzed on the glaze. Harlan's squad unleashed barrages, projectiles gouging hollows into the mass, but the crawlers evolved, exteriors toughening against the strikes. Elara lashed lianas over the divide, the shoots bulking with cortical plating to trap a surge, pulverizing them in a rasp of barbs and exoskeleton that vented wisps of caustic vapor. She wheeled, gaze sharpening at the plinth. "Extract swift—those diagrams are our advantage. But if we tarry, this frost seizes our traction first." Lirael discharged a deluge, electricity leaping from her palms in serrated prongs that earthed via the horde, frying bunches into spasming piles, the ozone tang blending with the saccharine rot as their cores seethed. Yet the counterstroke recoiled, a pressure wave pounding her torso like a battering ram, compelling a hack that savored of copper and rime. She leaned on a pinnacle, posture broadening. "The leader's track—dim sigils on the distant vault. Trail them, or we squander shots on phantoms." Terry wrenched the data shard loose, stowing it as plasma rays jetted from his gauntlet, incandescent jets slashing through the thickest throng, liquefying nuclei into dross that gathered and congealed into inert spines. The team advanced, scaling a vertical facade of ice-laced rock, digits numb in fissures, soles hunting grip on perilous shelves that sheared fragments into the void beneath. Gale wailed via the hall, flogging mantles and fragmenting sight, the freeze infiltrating armor joints to benumb extremities. At the vault's foot, the armored leader's outline stuttered— not corporeal, but a holographic lure that fragmented under a trooper's shot, unveiling a backup gateway gaping wide, its borders fringed with advancing rime from the glacial subrealm afar. The leader's actual shape darted across, exosuit jets igniting, but the gateway's ignition drew like a cyclone, inhaling atmosphere and rubble into a whirl that toppled the team onward. They cascaded through in a knot, crashing onto a steppe where squalls abraded the field, sight curtailed to eddying white. Glacial monstrosities roused in the mounds—towering brutes of frost and breach-taint, their pelts encrusted with serrated slabs, orbs blazing with internal rot. One rose, thundering a bellow that quivered the terrain, dispatching seismic pulses that fissured

the drifts. Harlan dropped to a knee, rifle crackling restraint shots that flaked slabs but scarcely impeded the rush. Elara alighted in a squat, lianas stabbing into the tundra to moor, though the earth defied, rigid as iron. She propelled a shaft into the brute's side, the point embedding to unleash a defrosting potion that steamed and enfeebled the frost. "Encircling it—your domes for the sides, Terry. Can't ensnare if it flattens us." Lirael thrust up, gale aiding her vault to elude a flailing appendage that demolished the site she'd held, fragments scattering like grenades. A delirious onslaught struck then—illusions of blazes caressing her hide where flakes drifted, the warmth specter compelling her to perspire even as freezer burn gnawed her digits. She snarled, directing the confusion into a tempestweave that invoked sleet-veiled blasts, pounding the brute's pivots until fissures latticed. "The gateway's volatile—clamp it aft us, or reinforcements flood!" Terry barreled ahead, kinetic dome broadening to intercept a talon slash that buckled the veil with a tolling chime, the collision shuddering his limbs. He linked the shard mid-stride, merging its intelligence with his emitter to craft a nexus mesh—plasma filaments stabbing out to interweave with Lirael's electricity and Elara's lianas, the unified might looping the brute like a garrote. Forces sparked, charring tissue and frost equally, the horror flailing as its slabs peeled in liquefied masses, the earth lurching under its terminal spasms. But the gateway vomited broader, disgorging a novel surge: scuttlers acclimated to the freeze, their shapes stretched with rime quills. The leader's mirth reverberated from the flurry ahead, mocking. Terry stowed the emitter, team assembling at his rear, but a profound thrum accumulated beneath the flakes—a gargantuan contour rousing, its contour thrusting up via the shell.

Chapter 10: Icebound Reckoning

Ice cracked like thunder underfoot as the titanic shape heaved itself free from the cavern's frozen floor. Jagged fissures spiderwebbed outward, spewing plumes of superheated vapor that reeked of ozone laced with burnt-sugar stench. The leviathan's form coalesced in the dim glow of bioluminescent fungi— a hulking behemoth forged from corruption, its body a grotesque fusion

of glacial armor and pulsating black ichor. Enormous plates of corrupted ice sheathed its torso, veined with oily veins that throbbed and wept crystalline fluid, while tendrils of frozen metal whipped from its flanks, scraping furrows into the stone with a screech that set teeth on edge. Terry skidded to a halt, boots grinding against the slick permafrost, his gauntlets buzzing as they primed plasma coils. "Target the joints," he bellowed, voice slicing through the howl of wind whipping through the chamber. "Weave a grid around its base—don't let it fully emerge." His fingers danced over a wrist-mounted interface, etching runes that flared with azure light, channeling mana into searing energy. Elara crouched beside him, her bow already nocked with a thorn-laced arrow. She glanced at the squad's flanks, where Harlan's riflemen hunkered behind ice barricades, then nodded sharply toward Lirael. "Vines first to anchor it—your tempests will shatter the ice after." Her tone carried a clipped edge, approving the plan's layered assault without a hint of doubt, even as she flexed her grip on the bowstring, knuckles blanching against the chill. From the leviathan's maw, a blizzard erupted—not mere wind, but a delirious gale laced with corruption's taint. Phantoms of jagged hail pelted the group, solidifying into razor flecks that drew blood from exposed skin. Lirael thrust her staff forward, conjuring a tempest that roared to life with crackling fury. Bolts of lightning arced from her palms, hammering the illusions into dissipating sparks, the air thickening with the metallic tang of ionized frost. She shot Terry a sidelong look, her jaw clenched. "Your grid better hold—last one nearly cooked us." The words came out as a terse mutter, her free hand clenching the staff tighter, betraying her skepticism toward his untested fusion. The brute lunged, one enormous limb—a claw the size of a transport pod—crashing down and pulverizing a squad member's cover. Shards of ice exploded outward, embedding in armor and flesh alike. Harlan bellowed orders, his squad unleashing a barrage of suppressive fire: kinetic rounds punched into the leviathan's underbelly, chipping at the corrupted plating with bursts of steam and splintered crystal. But the ground lurched again, birthing swarms of rime-scuttlers—chittering horrors with legs like fractured glass, their bodies encrusted in hoarfrost that shattered on impact, releasing bursts of freezing shards. "Flank left!" Elara called, unleashing her arrow. It streaked through the air, trailing

emerald vines that erupted mid-flight, ensnaring a cluster of scuttlers. The plants coiled with barbed ferocity, crushing exoskeletons in wet crunches, black ichor oozing from the wounds to sizzle on the ice. One scuttler broke free, lunging at her leg; she pivoted, stomping its core with a boot that ground it into glittering pulp, the burnt-sugar stench rising sharply. Terry's plasma lances ignited next, twin beams of superheated azure fire piercing from his gauntlets. They struck the leviathan's emerging shoulder joint, melting through glacial armor in a sizzle of vaporizing corruption. The brute recoiled, its roar a guttural vibration that shook stalactites loose, raining debris in a cacophony of impacts. But the backlash came swift: explosive taint bulbs bloated from the floor, pulsating orbs of oily black that detonated in geysers of crystalline shrapnel. One burst near Kael's position, hurling the instructor backward; he rolled, firing his rifle one-handed to shred the remnants, blood streaming from a gash on his brow. Casualties mounted as the delirious blizzard intensified. A rifleman screamed, clawing at his face where phantom frostbite bloomed into real blisters, his skin bubbling with fused ice and vein-like corruption. Lirael channeled her tempestweave into a whirlwind barrier, the gale whipping snow into a vortex that deflected the worst of the barrage, but it drained her—sweat beaded on her forehead despite the biting cold, freezing into tiny crystals that she dashed away with an impatient swipe. "Push forward—sever the primary limb!" Terry commanded, advancing with a kinetic shield flickering into place around him, absorbing a swipe from a tendril that left the barrier shimmering with stress fractures. He fired another lance, the plasma coring into the leviathan's forelimb, superheating the ichor within until it boiled and burst in a spray of molten black. The appendage spasmed, crashing sideways and crushing a wave of scuttlers under its weight, their carapaces popping like overripe fruit. Elara vaulted over a fallen bulb's crater, her vines surging from the ground to lash at the brute's undercarriage. Thorny tendrils burrowed into softer corruption, twisting and pulling with raw, vegetative force, ripping free chunks of pulsating flesh that writhed on the ice before crystallizing into jagged spikes. She paused to glance at Harlan, who was reloading amid the chaos, his face smeared with frost. "Your fire's pinning them—keep it tight on the bulbs," she said, her voice steady as she nocked another arrow, emphasizing the

squad's role without pausing her weave. The leviathan thrashed, its remaining limbs pounding the cavern floor, sending tremors that toppled more squad members. One slid into a crevasse, vanishing with a final, reverberating yell, while another took a scuttler to the throat, the creature's mandibles fusing bone to rusted ice in a gurgling spray. Harlan's squad returned fire relentlessly, bullets ricocheting off armored hides with sparks and ricochets, but the numbers wore them down—ammunition clattered empty, forcing desperate melee strikes with bayonets that skittered across crystalline shells. Lirael unleashed a torrent of lightning, the bolts forking across the leviathan's torso like veins of raw electricity. They exploded against the glacial plates, shattering them into a hail of razor fragments that pattered like gunfire. The air buzzed with static, the ozone stench overwhelming, mingling with the wet slurp of corrupting ice as new veins pulsed from the wounds. She staggered as a taint bulb detonated nearby, the blast singeing her cloak and drawing a hiss from her lips. "These illusions are solidifying faster—your shield's the only thing keeping us from being buried," she admitted to Terry, her stance widening for balance as she prepared another surge, revealing her reluctant reliance on his tech. With a final, coordinated assault, they targeted the brute's core limb. Terry's plasma grid wove overhead, a lattice of searing energy that pinned the appendage in place, melting restraints into slag. Elara's vines wrapped it like pythons, thorns piercing deep to anchor and tear. Lirael's tempest converged, gales screaming as lightning hammered the joint in staccato blasts. Harlan's remaining squad poured rounds into the weakening spot, the impacts blooming into craters of steaming ichor. The limb sheared free with a deafening crack, the leviathan bellowing as it toppled, exposing a crystalline console embedded in its flank—a glowing obelisk etched with runes, buzzing with forbidden data. Terry lunged forward, shield flaring to bat aside scuttlers, and slammed his interface against it. Schematics flooded his visor: blueprints for a multiversal engine, pulsating with corruption schematics, the armored leader's design to harness taint as a weapon across realms. "This is it—the syndicate's heart. Father's notes... they twisted his work into this abomination." But triumph shattered as the leader's voice reverberated from the shadows, armored figure silhouetted against a widening breach.

"Fools—witness the convergence." He activated the gateway with a ritual gesture, black veins erupting from the console to link with the leviathan's corpse. The air warped, a cataclysmic portal yawning open, sucking in ice and debris with gravitational fury. The survivors—Terry, Elara, Lirael, Harlan, Kael, and a handful of battered squad—were yanked toward it, weapons firing wildly into the void. They tumbled into a converging nexus, realms bleeding together in a maelstrom of volcanic ash, frozen gales, and forge-heat. The leader stood at the engine's core, a throbbing sphere of crystallized corruption suspended in the chaos, runes igniting with oily fire. Terry rose, gauntlets blazing, and unleashed a hubris-laced Nexus-weave—a titanic plasma storm that clashed against the ritual's barrier, energies colliding in explosions of superheated vapor and shattering crystal. The weave pierced partially, sealing veins with grids of molten containment, but the backlash erupted: a volatile surge of corruption that hurled the group apart. Elara cartwheeled through a breach, vines trailing like lifelines; Lirael spun into a stormy pocket, lightning flickering in her wake; Harlan and the squad scattered into forge-fires, rifles glinting. Terry clawed at the air, interface sparking, as the multiversal frontier swallowed him whole—his fingers closing around a fragment of the console, pulling it free into the unknown.

Terry's body slammed into unyielding ground, the impact jarring his spine as if hammered by a forge anvil. Frost-crusted shards skittered across his visor, but the air that rushed into his lungs carried no bite of ice—instead, it scorched with the acrid bite of superheated metal and smoldering oil. He rolled to a crouch, gauntlets scraping against rusted grating that groaned under his weight, the fragment of console clutched in his fist like a talisman against the disorientation. Sparks danced from his interface, shorting against the oily residue coating his gloves, and he blinked away the blur of tumbling realms: volcanic glows melting into glacial blues, then shattering into this inferno of clangor and heat. Around him loomed skeletal spires of corroded steel, their surfaces pitted and weeping rivulets of molten slag that hissed as they pooled in cracks below. Automated hammers pounded in rhythmic fury from distant platforms, each strike vibrating through the deck like a heartbeat of industry gone feral.

Core vents belched plumes of plasma, gouting orange flares that illuminated swarms of rogue automatons locked in sparking duels—limbs whirring, blades clashing in showers of molten droplets. The ground trembled, not from the academy's quakes, but from the relentless churn of hidden forges burrowing into the earth. This wasn't Earth—not the fractured remnants he knew—but a pocket realm bleeding through the nexus, a forge-world called Ferrum Core, its air thick with the tang of alloys and the faint, insidious undernote of ozone and burnt sugar. Riftblight had clawed its way here too, twisting the machines into something alive and ravenous. A whirring screech cut the din. Terry pivoted, shield snapping up as a trio of scuttling forms lunged from a slag heap—mechari scavengers, their oil-slicked skins fused with whirring implants that clicked like insect mandibles. One's arm ended in a jagged drill-bit, spinning with a whine that drilled into his ears, while another's chest plate bulged with crystalline veins pulsing black ichor. They moved with jerky precision, eyes glowing with corrupted data feeds, driven by the blight's hunger to assimilate. He weighed his options: the nearest vent spewed plasma to his left, a potential barrier if he could lure them close, but the heat risked melting his suit's joints. Rightward, a collapsed gantry offered cover, but scaling it meant exposing his back to the automatons clashing overhead. Goal clear—secure the fragment, interface it fully before more threats converged. He darted right, boots pounding the grating as he vaulted a puddle of cooling slag that bubbled like tar. The lead mechari drill-arm thrust forward, grazing his shield with a screech of sparks. The force shoved him sideways, his shoulder slamming into a pipe that bent with a metallic groan, sending a jolt up his arm that numbed his fingers. He countered with a plasma lance, the superheated bolt erupting from his gauntlet in a streak of azure fire, punching through the creature's torso. Ichor sprayed, sizzling on the ground where it crystallized into jagged spikes that snagged at his boot. The mechari staggered, implants sparking wildly, before collapsing in a heap of twitching servos, its drill whirring to a halt amid wet, crackling pops. But the other two flanked him, one hurling a scavenged blade that embedded in the grating inches from his heel, vibrating with enough force to buckle the metal. Terry fired a kinetic pulse from his offhand, the shockwave rippling air like a hammer blow, hurling the

blade-thrower backward into a vent's edge. It crumpled there, chassis crumpling with a series of hydraulic hisses, limbs flailing as pseudoflesh—blight-warped synthetic skin—tore free in ragged strips, fusing with the hot metal in a stench of charred sugar. The last mechari leaped, its legs telescoping with a grind of gears, claws raking toward his visor. Terry ducked, the swipe whistling over his head, close enough to shear a lock of hair that floated down singed. He drove his elbow into its midsection, feeling the give of corrupted plating, then channeled mana through his runic circuits. Energy converted in a surge, his gauntlet blooming into a grid of containment arcs that latched onto the creature's frame. Electricity arced, not the clean storm of Lirael's weaves, but a precise overload that fried circuits and boiled ichor from within. The mechari convulsed, body arching as black veins ruptured in sprays that pattered against his shield like acid rain, etching faint pits into the energy field. It toppled, smoking, the ground beneath it contorting as blight seeped out, twisting the grating into fleshy tendrils that probed blindly before hardening into crystalline barbs. Panting, Terry knelt amid the wreckage, prying the fragment's port open with trembling thumbs. His shoulder throbbed, a deep ache from the pipe's impact that made each breath pull like a vice on bruised muscle. The schematics hummed to life in his visor, holographic overlays flickering: the multiversal engine's core, a sphere designed to siphon Riftblight across realms, weaponizing mutations into an army of hybrids. Father's notes layered beneath, distorted—experiments meant to stabilize rifts, perverted into this engine of chaos. Syndicate signatures matched the armored leader's tech, linking back to Eldergard's underbelly. A distant rumble shook the spires, automatons pausing their skirmishes as if synced to a new command. From a looming megastructure, a colossal silhouette detached— a rift-forged behemoth, its frame a fusion of forge-steel and glacial corruption dragged from the nexus bleed. Jagged ice-armored plates sheathed its hull, crackling with frost that warred against the ambient heat, steam hissing where they met. Limbs like hydraulic pistons ended in claws that gouged furrows into the slag, each step pulverizing debris into powder. Behind it, waves of rime-scuttlers skittered—smaller mechari twisted by the blight, their forms encrusted in hoarfrost that shattered with each scuttle, revealing whirring blades beneath. Terry's grip tightened

on the fragment, visor scanning: the behemoth's joints glowed with weak points, rune-etched vents leaking plasma-ichor. Flee to the gantry for height? Risky, with scuttlers swarming the base. Or stand ground, weave a plasma barrier to funnel them into the vents' fire. The heat from those gouts could backfire, warping his own tech if too close. Immediate goal: extract the engine's shutdown sequence from the fragment, then sever the behemoth's advance before it summoned more. He activated his shield, the field humming as it expanded into a dome of kinetic weave, deflecting the first volley of scuttler shards—frozen projectiles that detonated on impact, blooming into explosive taint bulbs that ruptured with wet pops, spraying corrosive mist. One bulb grazed the dome's edge, the blast's force rattling his teeth and leaving a ringing buzz in his skull, as if hammers struck anvils inside his head. He winced, shaking it off, and loosed a barrage of plasma lances. Bolts streaked out, superheated spears that melted through a scuttler's frost-shell, the creature exploding in a geyser of steam and shards that peppered the ground like shrapnel. The behemoth charged, its claw sweeping in a wide arc that uprooted a support beam, hurling it like a battering ram. Terry sidestepped, the beam crashing past to embed in a wall with a thunderous clang, vibrations traveling up his legs and making his knees buckle momentarily. He retaliated, targeting the lead limb's joint with a focused lance—the plasma bored in, melting ice to reveal pulsing veins beneath. The behemoth reared, bellowing a mechanical roar that warped the air, sending hallucinatory blizzards whipping across his visor: phantom gales that carried the illusory screams of Elara and Lirael, sharp enough to pierce his ears like needles, forcing him to clap a hand over them as nausea roiled his gut, bile rising in his throat. Gritting through it, he pressed the assault. Another lance pierced the joint, ichor fountaining out in a black arc that crystallized mid-air into spikes raining down. The limb buckled, grinding against the deck as the behemoth listed, exposing a secondary console on its flank—etched with the same syndicate runes, buzzing with auxiliary data. Scuttlers surged to protect it, their bulbs detonating in clusters that cratered the ground, one explosion's wave slamming Terry's back and hurling him forward. He skidded, armor scraping sparks, ribs protesting with a sharp stab that stole his breath, each inhale a labored wheeze.

Crawling to the console, he slammed his interface home, data flooding in: shutdown protocols, realm coordinates tying Ferrum Core to the engine's network. But the behemoth's remaining claw descended, smashing down to crush him. Terry rolled aside, the impact pulverizing the grating into a sinkhole of twisted metal, and fired upward. Plasma grid deployed, arcs lancing into the underbelly, severing cables that sparked and spat molten droplets. The claw retracted, severed at the elbow in a cascade of frost-shattered steel and oozing blight, the limb crashing nearby with a boom that deafened him further, world muffling to a dull throb. Mechari reinforcements clambered from the shadows, but Terry yanked the console fragment free—now two pieces in his possession—and bolted for a side vent, shield flaring to bat aside pursuing scuttlers. Their claws raked his leg, tearing a gash that burned like fire, blood mixing with oil as he limped onward. The behemoth thrashed, toppling a spire section that blocked his pursuers in a landslide of debris. He ducked into a service tunnel, the clang of hammers echoing behind, and interfaced the fragments together. Full blueprint: the engine's weakness, a core rune vulnerable to overload. A new tremor shook the tunnel—the leader's influence rippling through realms. Terry smirked, wiping ichor from his visor, and plotted his weave: plasma to breach, kinetic to contain. But shouts echoed ahead—human voices? Survivors from the scatter? He pushed forward, gauntlets priming for the next clash.

The shouts sharpened into words as Terry rounded a jagged bend in the tunnel, his boots crunching over frost-laced gravel. "Hold the line—vines on the flank!" Elara's voice, hoarse but commanding. He burst into the cavern's maw, a vast hollow of blue-veined ice that hummed with rift energy, its ceiling a fractured dome dripping needle-sharp stalactites. There, amid swirling snow flurries, his allies huddled behind an improvised barricade of toppled crates and frozen debris: Elara, her bow drawn taut; Lirael, palms crackling with static; remnants of Harlan's squad, rifles barking in staccato bursts; and a cluster of academy survivors under Kael's grizzled lead, their weaves flickering like dying stars. But the cavern floor heaved. Cracks spiderwebbed outward from a central fissure, exhaling plumes of superchilled mist that burned lungs like inhaled glass. From

the depths rose the massive shape—an immense leviathan, its bulk sheathed in glacial corruption, armor plates of translucent ice veined with oily black blight that pulsed like exposed arteries. Towering twice the height of the guardian titans they'd felled before, it uncoiled a serpentine neck crowned by a maw of jagged fangs, each breath a gale that whipped snow into blinding sheets. Hulking limbs, thicker than ancient oaks, ended in claws that gouged furrows into the permafrost, sending tremors that buckled the ground beneath Terry's feet. Scuttlers skittered from its underbelly—rime-crusted horrors with segmented bodies that clicked like shattering porcelain, their explosive taint bulbs glowing ominously on carapaces. One pod detonated nearby, the blast radius shredding a squad member's arm in a spray of frost and blood, the acrid tang of burnt ozone mixing with the cavern's metallic chill. Terry's gauntlets whirred, priming plasma coils. Flee to the side tunnels? No—too narrow for the group, and the leviathan's tail could seal them in. Charge the flank? Risky with those bulbs. He scanned: Elara's vines could anchor its legs, Lirael's storms disrupt the ice. Goal: cripple mobility first, expose the core. He bellowed, "Elara, roots to the forelimbs! Lirael, tempests on the joints—crack that armor!" His voice cut through the gale, and he lunged forward, shield snapping up to deflect a scuttler's lunge, the impact jarring his shoulder like a hammer blow. Elara loosed an arrow tipped with glowing sap, the projectile burrowing into the ice before erupting into thorny tendrils that lashed out, coiling around the leviathan's forward limb with a creak of straining permafrost. The beast roared—a thunderous bellow that vibrated ribs and shattered nearby stalactites into razor hail. It reared, the trapped leg cracking under tension, but its free claw swept down, pulverizing a rifleman into the wall with a wet crunch, crimson blooming against white frost. Lirael thrust her hands skyward, summoning a whirlwind laced with lightning forks that arced across the cavern, slamming into the joint with sizzling precision. Ice splintered, black ichor oozing from the rift, crystallizing into spikes that impaled two scuttlers mid-scuttle. But the backlash hurled her back, boots sliding on slick ice; she caught herself on a vine-wrapped crate, fingers digging in until knuckles blanched. Terry fired. Lances of superheated plasma streaked out, white-hot spears that bored into the exposed underbelly, melting armor into steaming puddles that hissed and

evaporated in the cold. The leviathan thrashed, tail whipping to crater the barricade—Kael dove left, rolling as shards pelted his back, while a survivor screamed, leg pinned under rubble. Bulbs burst in retaliation, shockwaves rippling air into pressure waves that bowled Terry over, his helmet cracking against stone, vision blurring with stars and the coppery bite of blood on his tongue. “Suppress the swarms!” Kael barked, his squad’s rifles chattering, bullets ricocheting off rime shells in sparks of blue fire. One scuttler exploded prematurely, showering them with chitin fragments that clattered like hail, but more poured from crevices, bulbs swelling with inner glow. Elara’s vines strained, thorns piercing blight veins that wept oily fluid, the smell of scorched sugar turning Terry’s stomach. She gritted her teeth, sweat beading on her brow despite the freeze, and yanked harder— the limb buckled, slamming down to embed claws in ice, immobilizing half its reach. But the cost: a bulb cluster detonated at her feet, the force ripping her stance, shrapnel grazing her thigh in a line of fire that made her hiss, blood freezing almost instantly. Lirael recovered, channeling another tempest—a howling vortex that funneled scuttlers into a crushing spiral, their bodies popping like overripe fruit, ichor splattering walls in dark streaks. The leviathan’s maw gaped, exhaling a blizzard laced with hallucinatory shards; illusions bloomed—phantom allies turning on them, blades flashing. Terry blinked hard, shaking off a spectral Elara’s strike that felt all too solid, her “ghost” dissipating in a puff of frost as he pivoted, plasma scorching the air where it’d stood. Tactically: sever the neck next? Too high, reach an issue. Target the tail—disrupt balance. The beast listed from Elara’s bind, a crystalline console glinting on its flank, runes pulsing with the same syndicate script. Data there—blueprints, the engine’s heart. He weighed the leap: scuttlers below, but shield could hold. “Cover me—flank console!” He dashed, boots pounding uneven ice, dodging a bulb’s blast that scorched his pauldron black. Squad fire pinned the swarms, bullets punching through shells to detonate innards prematurely, geysers of blight erupting. Lirael’s lightning forked to his path, vaporizing a cluster that lunged, the ozone sting sharpening his focus. Terry vaulted a fissure, gauntlet slamming into the console mid-leap. Interface locked; data surged—final schematics, the multiversal engine’s blueprint: a nexus core fueled by rift veins, vulnerable to overload

at its ritual hub. Coordinates flashed: converging realms, the leader's endgame. The leviathan sensed the breach. Its head snapped down, fangs grazing Terry's shield in a screech of rending metal, the force hurling him off, tumbling into a snowdrift that numbed his side. Ichor dripped from the console wound, freezing into barbs that he snapped free, shards slicing his palm. He rose, firing upward—plasma grid weaving a net that sliced into the neck, cauterizing flesh in bursts of steam and crackling pops. Elara's vines climbed higher, thorns burrowing into eyes, blinding one orb to milky ooze. The beast bucked, dislodging her; she fell, rolling to avoid a claw that gouged her previous position into a trench. Lirael unleashed a full stormweave, tempests hammering the torso, ice armor fracturing into a cascade of boulders that buried scuttlers and crushed a squad leg under rubble, the man's agonized yell cut short by Kael's mercy shot. Casualties mounted—two more survivors down, riddled with crystalline lacerations, their blood steaming faintly before congealing. The air thickened with the reek of charred blight and cordite, ground quaking as the leviathan's thrashings widened fissures, swallowing debris into abyssal drops. But from the chamber's far wall, a figure emerged—the armored leader, silhouette warped by rift distortions, gauntlets raised in a corrupted ritual. Black veins snaked from his palms, threading into the air to form a cataclysmic gateway: a swirling vortex of fractured realities, edges fraying like torn fabric, pulling at the cavern with gravitational hunger. Winds howled inward, yanking loose ice and bodies alike; a scuttler tumbled in, vanishing with a pop. "Into the convergence!" the leader's voice boomed, amplified by suit emitters, laced with static. He channeled deeper, the gateway blooming wider, realms bleeding through—flashes of volcanic glow, forge sparks, frozen wastes colliding in a maelstrom of shards and embers. Terry yanked the console shard free, pocketing it with the others. The leviathan reared one last time, but Elara's final vine lash severed a limb at the base, the massive appendage crashing down to block pursuing bulbs, ichor pooling into a freezing mire. Lirael's tempest converged on the stump, lightning exploding it into harmless chunks that avalanched across the floor. No time to regroup. The gateway's pull intensified, snatching at Terry's legs, frostbite nipping exposed skin. He glanced: Elara clung to a vine root, face set in grim resolve; Lirael braced against wind,

hair whipping like storm flags; Kael hauled a wounded ally, squad scattering to the vortex's edge. Flee? Impossible—the academy's fate hinged here. Overload the engine through the weave: plasma to breach the ritual, kinetic barriers to contain the surge. Hubris burned in his chest, but he smirked through chattering teeth, gauntlets overclocking with a whine. He charged the gateway's rim, allies falling in behind, the leader's ritual cresting in a blaze of corrupted light. Terry unleashed his Nexus-weave: lances arcing into the vortex core, superheating the threads to molten fury, while shields bloomed to corral the backlash. The leader countered, blight tendrils lashing out like whips, one scoring Terry's arm in a searing line that peeled synth-leather. Collision: plasma met ritual in a cataclysm of sparks and rifts. The engine hub—visible now in the convergence, a throbbing obelisk of fused realms—cracked under overload, veins bursting in geysers of oily expulsion that corroded air into acrid fog. Seals formed partially, the gateway contracting with a groan like buckling steel, but the volatile rebound erupted—a shockwave of multiversal debris hurling them apart. Terry spun through the chaos, impacts battering his shield until it fizzled out. Elara's vine snagged his wrist briefly, then snapped; Lirael's lightning grazed him in a parting jolt. They scattered into the frontier's maw—portals splintering open to unknown expanses, the leader's laughter echoing as darkness swallowed them whole. Terry's body tumbled, armor groaning, until he slammed into yielding earth, the impact jarring breath from lungs, vision fading to pinpricks amid alien winds.

Terry's eyelids fluttered against grit and frost. Pain knifed through his ribs, each breath scraping like fractured glass in his chest. He rolled onto his side, gauntlets crunching into soft, yielding soil—not the unyielding ice of the cavern, but something warmer, loamy, laced with the metallic tang of alien earth. Gales screamed overhead, carrying not the bite of blizzards but a humid blast scented with ozone and charred undergrowth. His vision sharpened in patches: twisted trees loomed, bark inscribed with glowing runes that throbbed like veins, their branches swaying in rhythmic defiance of the gale. He pushed upright, knees sinking into the muck. The data shards in his pocket dug into his thigh, a sharp reminder. Armor's integrity: 47%. Shields offline, weave

circuits stuttering erratically. No sign of the others. Elara's vine snap echoed in his mind, Lirael's jolt a phantom tingle on his skin. The leader's laughter—gone, swallowed by whatever breach had spat him here. A low rumble vibrated the ground. Terry froze, gaze probing the treeline. Shadows shifted, not from wind. Something prowled. He activated his gauntlet's scanner: bio-signs erratic, laced with rift signatures. Not friendly. "Elara? Lirael?" His voice cracked, swallowed by the gale. No response. He staggered forward, boots squelching through underbrush that parted like reluctant flesh. The trees thinned into a clearing, where aurora ribbons streaked a bruised sky, illuminating a herd of serpentine shapes burrowing into the earth—ice-wyrms? No, these slithered on crystalline scales, leaving trails of steaming vapor that sizzled against the humid air. The rumble grew. A shape burst from the treeline: furred, hulking, eyes glowing with bioluminescent fire. A Glacari—ursine nomad, lore fragments from academy briefs recalled. But this one moved wrong, paws elongated, fur sloughing in patches to reveal pulsating flesh cracked by rift fissures. Jaws unhinged, needle teeth fused with jagged crystals glinting. A Voidtouched Hound, corrupted from some village guardian into this abomination. It thundered—a multi-tonal shriek that twisted the air, vertigo slamming into Terry like a club. He stumbled, world tilting, but clamped his jaw and fired a plasma lance. The bolt streaked blue-white, superheating the air into a crackling trail. It struck the hound's flank, flesh erupting in a spray of ichor and steam, crystals shattering into shrapnel that pinged off nearby trees, gouging bark into molten furrows. The brute lunged, paws silent on the loam. Terry dodged, rolling as elongated claws raked the earth, uprooting vines that whipped back like vengeful serpents. He countered with a kinetic pulse from his gauntlet—air compressing into a shockwave that hurled the hound sideways, its body slamming into a tree trunk with a crack of splintering wood. Bark exploded outward, shards embedding in the creature's exposed muscle, drawing a fresh shriek. But it rose, fissures widening to emit chilling whispers that clawed at his ears. Venom dripped from its maw, sizzling on the ground into blackened pits. Terry backed toward the clearing, weaving a hasty energy shield—translucent barrier buzzing to life, rippling under the strain. The hound pounced again, slamming into the shield. Impact buckled it,

force jarring his arms, but held. He funneled mana through his circuits, converting to a plasma grid that arced across the barrier, electrocuting the brute on contact. Fur ignited in bursts, flesh bubbling as rift's influence met superheat, the air filling with the reek of ozone and burnt-sugar stench. It recoiled, paws scrabbling, but the vertigo lingered, blurring his aim. Terry intensified the assault, lancing another bolt that pierced a hind leg, joint erupting in a fountain of oily fluid that corroded the grass into crystalline spikes. The hound collapsed, twitching, but its eyes fixed on him—whispers intensifying, summoning vertigo anew. He snarled, overclocking his gauntlets despite the whir of overheating coils, and unleashed a full barrage. Plasma lances converged, melting the skull into slag, brain matter sizzling into vapor. The body slumped, fissures sealing in death throes, the whispers fading to silence. Breath ragged, Terry deactivated the shield, energy reserves dipping to 22%. The clearing steamed from the fight, earth cratered and scorched. He knelt by the corpse, scanner probing: rift corruption at 89%, origin tied to Frostveil's geothermal vents. This planet—yielding earth beneath ice? The lore matched: endless tundras masking thermal oases, Glacari burrowing for ambushes. But how? The backlash had flung him across realms, the multiversal engine's fracture spitting him into this frontier. A rustle from the trees. Terry spun, gauntlet raised. Not the hound. Elara emerged, vines trailing from her gloves like living ropes, one coiled around her waist where a gash wept blood through torn leathers. She glanced at the corpse, then at his plasma-scorched gauntlet, her fingers tightening on a vine tip—a subtle flex revealing doubt in his solo assault. "Relying on tech alone again?" Her tone was even, but she uncoiled a vine to probe the crater's edge, testing stability. "We need roots to anchor these breaches, not just burn them." Before he could retort, wind screamed sharper. Lirael staggered into view, hair matted with frost, one arm cradled, lightning residue crackling faintly along her fingertips. She barked a short laugh at the steaming remains, but her free hand clenched into a fist, knuckles blanching—opinion clear on his aggressive weave risking isolation. "Flashy, but it left us scattered." She flexed her injured arm, wincing as sparks danced unbidden. "Tempests bind tighter than shields." Terry smirked, the corner of his mouth twitching upward despite the throb in his own arm. "It worked. Shards intact." He

patted his pocket, but the gesture faltered as tremors rippled the ground—distant, but building. The wyrms in the clearing stirred, burrowing faster, steam vents hissing louder. Kael's voice sliced through, hoarse from the treeline. "Prince! Survivors—two squad left." The instructor limped forward, rifle slung low, supporting a bandaged ally whose leg ended in a charred stump. Harlan's squad reduced to echoes. Kael eyed Terry's gauntlet, then the horizon where auroras twisted unnaturally, his jaw clenching in a grim line—a nod to the folly of charging the nexus without fallback lines. "Engine's fracture pulled us here," Kael said, rifle barrel sweeping the underbrush. "Frostveil. Academy logs called it a sub-realm bleed. Corruption's deeper—those hounds patrol oases now." Elara nodded, brewing a quick elixir from pouch herbs, the mixture bubbling green as she pressed it to Lirael's arm. Vines slithered up, staunching blood with thorny grips. Lirael hissed but held still, her gaze flicking to Terry—fingers unclenching slightly, a concession to regrouping. They moved as one, weaving through the trees toward a geothermal glow on the horizon. Terry's scanner pinged: rift veins throbbing underground, drawing Glacari packs. A howl echoed—not the hound's, but a chorus, multi-tonal shrieks blending with wyrm rumbles. Tension coiled in his gut, but he led, plasma buzzing faintly. The oasis emerged: a steaming pool ringed by jagged fjords, ice sheets splintering under aurora light. But corruption warped it—oily black seeping from vents, crystallizing into pulsating shards that twisted stone into flesh-like protrusions. Glacari shadows lurked, eyes bioluminescent, but several bore rift fissures, fur patchy, paws elongated. "Ambush formation," Terry muttered, gauntlets whirring. Elara's vines rooted into the earth, thorny barriers sprouting to flank the pool. Lirael summoned a tempest, gales whipping snow into blinding veils, her injured arm trembling but channeling surges that crackled the air. Kael's squad dropped to prone, rifles crackling suppressive rounds that punched craters into ice, shrapnel ricocheting off crystals. The pack charged—Voidtouched Hounds leading, Glacari brutes behind, axes fused with crystalline edges. A hound pounced first, jaws unhinging toward Elara. She lashed vines, entangling its maw; thorns pierced flesh, drawing ichor that corroded the tendrils, forcing her to sever them with a grunt. Her free hand gestured sharply at Terry—urging plasma support over

solo plays. He fired. Lances arced, superheating a brute's axe mid-swing; metal melted into slag, splashing across fur in molten rivulets that ignited howls. The impact hurled the Glacari back, body cratering the ice, fractures spiderwebbing outward. Lirael followed, lightning torrent forking into the pack—strikes exploding hounds mid-leap, bodies convulsing in electric arcs, vertigo shrieks cut short by thunderclaps that shattered nearby shards into flying daggers. Kael's rounds punched through a hound's flank, venom sacs bursting in acidic sprays that etched pits into the snow. His ally, despite the leg, lobbed a grenade—explosion blooming orange, hurling corrupted Glacari into vents where steam scalded flesh from bone. But the pack pressed. A brute broke Elara's line, axe cleaving vines into steaming segments. She rolled, drawing her bow—enchanted arrow whistling, tip blooming into entangling roots that tripped the beast, roots burrowing into ice with audible cracks. Lirael bellowed, "Flank it—your shields, Terry!" Her tempest swelled, gales hurling shards like shrapnel, but exhaustion showed in her staggered step. Terry wove a kinetic barrier, dome expanding to corral the brute. It hammered the shield, force rippling like water under fists, but he overclocked plasma within—grid igniting, superheating the air inside to furnace levels. The brute's fur blistered, eyes bursting in pops of fluid, body slumping as the barrier contracted, crushing remnants into pulp. The last hound lunged at Kael, claws raking his rifle barrel, bending metal with a screech. He dropped it, drawing a sidearm—shots cracking into the maw, bullets ricocheting off crystals in sparks. Terry's lance finished it, bolt vaporizing the head in a flash that lit the oasis like dawn. Silence fell, broken by heavy breaths. The pool bubbled ominously, shards throbbing faster. Elara knelt by a fallen Glacari, scanning with a rune-etched leaf—her brow furrowing, fingers tracing a fissure. "This corruption... it's spreading from below. Engine's echo." Lirael leaned on her bow, lightning fading from her hands, but she shot Terry a glance, lips quirking in a brief nod—approval for the barrier's containment. Kael retrieved his bent rifle, testing the stock with a grunt. "Frontier's no sanctuary. Leader's trail—those auroras twist toward a nexus point." Terry interfaced his shards with the gauntlet, holograms flickering: blueprints of the multiversal engine, veins linking realms like Frostveil to Earth. But a new ping—approaching signatures,

heavier, with rift howls multiplying. They forged ahead, oasis fading behind. The ground shuddered violently again, stronger. From the fjords, a titanic shape stirred—ice splintering, something enormous uncoiling beneath. Worse, it wasn't alone. A fresh howl pierced the wind, nearer than before.

Chapter 11: Frostveil's Fractured Oasis

Terry lurched through the frost-encrusted drifts, his breath pluming in ragged clouds as geothermal vapors raked his lungs. The air stank of sulfur and scorched ozone, a poisonous fog rising from cracks in the ice flanking the steaming oasis ahead. His plasma gauntlet buzzed softly, its coils still cooling from the forge-world clash, casting unsteady azure glimmers across the icy plain. A deep snarl reverberated from the gloom, but he forged ahead, boots grinding through fragile hoarfrost toward the knot of silhouettes clustered around a churning thermal spring. Elara saw him first. She stood from her squat beside an improvised bulwark of razor-sharp ice fragments, her emerald cloak rimed with white, bow slung over her shoulder. Relief clenched her jaw as she beckoned him nearer, but her gaze probed the skyline, fingers flexing toward the satchel of thorn-seeds at her hip. "Prince," she called, voice low and sharp, "you look like you grappled a mechari and lost. Duck in before the hounds catch your scent." He slipped into the ring, dipping his head briefly to Lirael, who knelt wrapping a squad member's lacerated arm with strips of warmed fabric. Her silver hair clung damp with perspiration and frost, stormweave cuffs flickering faintly as she labored. Instructor Kael stood watch nearby, rifle propped on his shoulder, his visage scarred by frostbite, expression hard and intent. The remnants—five academy holdouts, their gear ripped and charred—clustered around a faltering heat emitter, countenances ashen beneath the aurora-streaked heavens. "Glad you made it," Lirael said without glancing up, her needle stabbing tissue with deft thrusts. "We lost two to those glacari packs on the way. Your father's slate—did it survive?" Terry dropped to one knee, extracting the data device from his jacket. Its display stuttered, scored with breach-marks from the gateway leap. "Intact. But the readings... they're linking

to something local." He eyed the injured man, whose leg terminated in a rough tourniquet drenched dark. The iron tang of blood blended with the oasis's mineral sting, churning his gut. Elara applied a hissing poultice to a holdout's blistered palm, her grasp firm despite the quiver in her tone. "We've mended what we could. Plant poultices for the scorches, but the taint's crawling beneath their hides already. We need to relocate soon." Kael bellowed a command, his team jolting to bolster the boundary. They hauled translucent boulders into a squat rampart, insetting them with Elara's vine-growth glyphs that throbbed emerald against the pale barren. "Reinforce the vents first," he said, gaze fixed on Terry. "Those seeps are churning fiercer. If the brutes strike now—" A guttural bellow interrupted him. From the surrounding ice ramparts, forms lumbered into sight: tainted Glacari brutes, towering bipeds twice a man's stature, their pelts melded with serrated frost-shields that shone like fractured obsidian. Throbbing conduits of oily ebony laced their frames, exuding corruption that sizzled upon touching the vapor. Trailing them prowled Voidtouched Hounds, sleek hunters with crystalline jaws leaking ichor, their thunders fracturing the atmosphere like splintering glass. "Positions!" Kael bellowed, rifle crackling as a slug tore through a hound's side, flinging splinters of frozen taint over the snow. The creature yelped, rolling into a vapor plume that scalded its coat to tatters. Elara's palms flashed, flinging thorn-seeds into the cracks. Vines burst in a barbed snarl, twisting like adders to entrap the foremost brute's limb. The monster flailed, its shielded hoof pounding pits into the glacier, but the spikes burrowed deep, extracting dark resin that steamed and burst. "Hold the line!" she urged, nocking her bow and unleashing an arrow capped with luminous resin—it lodged in a hound's orb, the collision flowering a caustic bloom that gnawed through bone. Lirael stood, limbs cast wide. A gale gathered over the oasis, clouds roiling with electric rage. Strikes pounded in a staccato cadence, splintering a brute's pauldron and flinging it reeling into its herd. The earth lurched beneath the blows, ozone honing the atmosphere until it stung the palate. One hound vaulted the vines, fangs clamping at a holdout's heel; Lirael's gale hurled it rearward, talons gouging trenches in the ice bulwark. Terry energized his gauntlet, digits flying over glyphic controls. A lattice of plasma bolts formed, scorching jets carving

incandescent trails through the throng. One ray halved a brute's forearm, the member cleaving away in a gush of sizzling ichor that pooled and solidified into barbs. The pungent odor of evaporated taint saturated the vapor, adhering to his gullet like burnt-sugar stench. "Aim for the conduits!" he snapped, adjusting the yield to curve between foes, kindling a hound mid-bound. Its crystalline tusks splintered on collision with the barrier, scattering like fragile sleet. The team's rifles merged into the melee, salvos of kinetic slugs thudding into pelts and detonating on impact. Cartridge hulls ejected in smoldering curves, stacking at their boots amid the slush. A brute pierced the vines, its enormous fist demolishing a stretch of rampart; rubble battered Terry's shield, which ignited kinetic azure to repel the fragments. He countered with a close-range plasma surge, the blaze distorting the atmosphere and carbonizing the monster's torso to dross. It crumpled, seizing, conduits bursting in oily fountains that the team evaded with urgent bounds. Waves battered their bulwarks—first a dozen hounds, then brutes lumbering in duos, their bellows quivering the glacier like remote thunder. Elara's vines regenerated, coiling to skewer and restrain, while Lirael's gales lashed in shrieking coils, flinging vapor into obscuring curtains. Terry's lattices adjusted, throbbing to sear seeps where small breaches bubbled from splintered bergs—iridescent rents vomiting oily filaments that squirmed like grubs. He welded one shut with a concentrated bolt, the plasma fusing the borders in a blaze of incandescent restraint, the breach's whir diminishing to a sizzle. Kael's voice sliced through the clamor, tactical and terse. "Flank left—hounds encircling!" A holdout discharged erratically, nicking a monster's lobe, but the kick wrenched his injured limb, eliciting a wince. Lirael shielded him with a lightning prong that curved chain-like, searing two hounds in a sputter of overheated tissue. As the final brute keeled, its crystalline tusks splintering against the glacier in a terminal twitch, the oasis sank into tense hush. The terrain steamed beneath, riddled with hollows and glossy with ichor that congealed into hazardous barbs. Holdouts sagged, torsos laboring, the tang of propellant and roasted flesh dense in the atmosphere. Elara crouched by the downed, her digits inscribing glyphs to draw restorative resin from her satchel, stemming a team member's femoral laceration that oozed dark-veined crimson. Terry swabbed perspiration

from his forehead, the data slate's radiance mirroring in his eyes. "The console—it's here, beneath the main spring." He indicated a frost-glazed plinth half-submerged in the hot basin, syndicate sigils incised dimly under the glaze. Lirael dipped her head, posture taut, digits gripping her cuff as if weighing the hazard. "Your father's creation again? If it's rigged—" "It's not," Terry interrupted, a smirk twitching his lip despite the fatigue. He scraped the hoarfrost with a plasma slicer, the tool whirring as it linked. Holographic diagrams flowered: schematics of a multiversal motor, conduits of corruption lacing its nucleus like infused toxin. "They're scheming to taint it entirely. Drown the domains with this... militarized corruption. And see—cross-linked to his trials. The armored fiend's trailing Dad's records." Elara bent closer, her respiration snagging as vines withdrew from her hold, drooping faintly from strain. "He sought to steady it, not disseminate it. This defiles everything." Kael surveyed the skyline, rifle buzzing a reload loop. "Reveals the leader's path. But we're vulnerable too. We extract and—" The earth lurched. Seismic shudders tore through the oasis, springs bursting in jets of blistering vapor that blistered bare flesh. Splits webbed outward from the plinth, expanding into a gaping wound. From its abyss surged a titanic frost-veined monstrosity—a looming quadruped, its rime-shielded limbs pulverizing the glacier to dust, crystalline tusks grinding with a rasp that jarred molars. Throbbing corruption conduits swelled along its sides, ejecting swarms of clattering crystalline sprites that scurried over the splintering shelf. "Evacuate!" Kael bellowed, dragging a holdout upright as the monster's talon raked a trench, flinging thermal plumes upward. Elara evoked a renewed bulwark of vines, barbed ramparts thrusting to gain instants, but the monstrosity's mass demolished it, fragments flying like grapeshot. Lirael discharged a gale bolt, the hit detonating against its shielded pelt in a deluge of sparks and mist. Terry's plasma lattice ignited, bolts scorching a conduit, but the monster reared, its bellow dislodging cascades from the bordering cliffs. The team dashed toward a constricting ravine, evading sprite talons that slashed the atmosphere, the monstrosity's chase fracturing the glacier under their soles. Terry peered rearward, gauntlet charging for the ensuing frantic weave, as the oasis disintegrated into the wound trailing them.

Terry's boots scraped on the splintering glacier as he pivoted, gauntlet buzzing with a buildup of azure charge. The ravine constricted ahead, its flanks sheer and laced with luminous cracks that ejected vapor in erratic jets. Behind, the quadruped monstrosity barreled closer, each paw pounding hollows into the shelf, flinging chunks of glacier like grapeshot. Sprites—those crystalline vermin, no taller than his knee—swarmed in their wake, their serrated limbs scraping as they leaped over the rubble, targeting ankles and shins. He probed the choices: the ravine's left branch plunged into a thermal spring cluster, offering blistering shelter but hazarding scalds from the fountains. Rightward, a shelf provided elevated terrain, but the creature's tusks could shear it away. Straight on resembled suicide—the monstrosity's bulk would block the outlet in instants. Pressing aim: gain separation, cull the sprites to lighten the team's load. Peril: overcharge his gauntlet and sear his limb in the subzero grip. "Flank the sprites!" he bellowed, twisting to unleash a plasma bolt. The projectile streaked, a superheated rod that atomized three sprites in a blaze of molten glass, their remnants pattering like scalding hail on the glacier. Ozone stung his nostrils, blending with the bitter tang of superheated rock. Elara swerved left, her digits flexing as thorny vines thrust from a rift in the ravine flank. The tendrils cracked out, encircling a sprite cluster and hauling them skyward, barbs puncturing shells with fleshy snaps. She grimaced, a palm clamping her bandaged shoulder where frostbite had raked earlier—raw sores peeking from ripped hide—but her jaw clenched tight. "Kael, guard the rear! Lirael, strike the big one's limbs!" Kael dipped his head, dragging a hobbling holdout by the collar while his rifle crackled. Suppressive salvos tore through the sprite forefront, slugs ricocheting off crystalline shells to burrow in the glacier with muted thumps. The fighter's breath clouded in labored gasps, his spare hand gripping a slash across his thigh that oozed dark crimson, staining the powder. "On it! Holdouts, bunch up—don't lag!" Lirael whirled mid-stride, gale whipping her cloak as she channeled a tempest. Forks of lightning leaped from her palms, not ghostly flickers but vivid strikes that pounded the monstrosity's forelimb. The hit detonated against its rime-shielded pelt, splintering shields into razor flecks that sliced the atmosphere. The creature reeled, a deep rumble quivering the earth like remote thunder, but it

recovered with a rake that gouged the ravine flank, dislodging a slab of glacier that smashed mere paces from the team. The team funneled into the constricting gap, geothermal springs hissing alerts along the base—pockets of superheated slurry bubbling up, blistering the careless. One holdout yelped as a sprite clamped onto his boot, its jaws chewing through leather; Elara's tendril snapped it loose, hurling the pest into a spring where it sizzled and burst like fat in a skillet. Terry's thoughts whirled through angles: the creature's conduits throbbed brighter now, corruption veins pulsating like bared arteries. Strike them—cauterize to hinder the regrowth. But the sprites were proliferating, spawning from torn nodes on the monster's sides, their ranks transforming the withdrawal into a gauntlet. He elevated his gauntlet again, kinetic barrier stuttering to life as a sprite's bound clanged against it, the shock jarring his wrist with a metallic grind. "Data slate secure?" he called to Elara, evading a vapor plume that blistered the atmosphere. She dipped her head, patting the satchel at her belt where the device buzzed softly. The diagrams seared in his memory: the multiversal engine, its nucleus a nexus of realms, now schemed for infestation. His father's records had cautioned of such taint—Riftblight as a catalyst, contorting dimensional currents into weapons. The armored leader wasn't just tearing; he was crafting a plague across worlds, employing those prohibited weaves to escalate the blight's dispersal. No time for that now—endure first. A spring detonated ahead, a fountain of boiling slurry that compelled the team to disperse. Lirael vaulted right, her soles crunching on fragile overhang, while Kael thrust two holdouts left into a shallow nook. Terry rolled ahead, plasma bolt discharging blindly to shield them, the projectile scorching a sprite mid-bound and leaving a smoking hollow in the glacier. The monstrosity's bellow reverberated, nearer, its tusks scraping the ravine flanks and sending cascades of powder down. "Regroup at the branch!" Kael yelled, his rifle's barrel flaring as he culled climbers scaling the flanks. A sprite horde crested the rim above, their talons etching sparks on rock as they plummeted like sleet. Elara evoked an interwoven barrier of creepers, roots burrowing into frozen soil to moor against the assault. The bulwark endured for heartbeats, barbs skewering a dozen sprites in spurts of oily ichor that reeked of burnt sugar and rust. But the creature rammed it, the blow splintering wood

and sinew alike; Elara reeled back, crimson trickling from a new slash on her cheek, her creepers withdrawing in frayed lashes. Lirael countered with a maelstrom, gale forces whipping sprites into the springs below. The wind screamed, bearing the crackle of ice splintering and the sizzle of submerged foes. One sprite clamped onto her arm, its crystal edge carving a line of red; she snarled, bashing it against the flank with a gust that pulverized it to powder. Terry's barrier buckled under a dual assault—two sprites piling on, their mass driving him to one knee. Chill seeped through his suit, deadening his digits as he overrode the gauntlet, channeling raw kinetic surge. The barrier throbbed outward in a concussive blast, flinging the vermin into the ravine flank with bone-crushing snaps. He thrust up, lungs searing from the sparse, icy atmosphere laced with brimstone. The branch loomed: left to the springs' labyrinth, right to bare bluffs. Springs provided bottlenecks but blistering perils; bluffs signified wind exposure, easy marks for the creature's rakes. Pressing aim: attain the distant shelf, two hundred meters out, where the ravine broadened into potential flight. Peril: the monstrosity's velocity—its limbs drove it like pistons, narrowing gaps in bounds. "Left—springs for shelter!" Terry resolved, gesturing as he discharged another bolt. The plasma struck a corruption conduit on the creature's haunch, the vein rupturing in a fountain of black sludge that congealed mid-air into serrated barbs. The monster thundered, decelerating as regenerative sinew mended with audible snaps, but the sprites pressed undaunted. The team channeled left, soles splashing through shallow hot pools that steamed and fractured the glacier. Kael's rifle crackled unceasingly, each shot a precise mallet to crystalline hinges, shattering limbs and sending crawlers tumbling into the slurry. A holdout slipped, ankle wrenching in a rift; Elara dragged him up by the collar, her sinews straining under the load, face carved with gritted resolve. Sprites flooded from the broadening wound behind, a chittering tide that clambered over their slain. Lirael's tempests lashed them rearward, lightning linking from one to the next in explosive chains, the atmosphere thickening with the tang of charred ozone and fusing quartz. But the monstrosity vaulted a spring, landing with a lurch that cleaved the route, demanding a sidetrack. Terry peered rearward—the creature's eyes, twin voids rimed in frost, locked on him. Its tusks raked the earth,

flinging superheated gravel that pelted his back like grapeshot. He gauged a frantic ploy: overload the gauntlet for a lattice surge, hazard the rebound scorching his veins. Or preserve for the shelf. "Hold formation!" he shouted, braiding plasma filaments into a hasty lattice. The web blazed across the narrowest point, a mesh of searing blue that halved the sprite horde. Dozens atomized in bursts of superheated gas, the lattice's blaze fusing glacier into rivulets that refroze into slick perils. Elara bolstered with creepers arching over the lattice like a cage, barbs dripping with trapped ichor. Lirael funneled gale to fan the blaze, transforming the bulwark into an inferno front that the monstrosity crashed against. Pelt shields splintered, fragments embedding in the ravine base with clinks, but it reared, tusks sweeping low. Kael discharged a grenade from his underbarrel, the detonation blooming orange, hurling corrupted Glacari into springs where vapor blistered sinew from bone. They erupted from the spring labyrinth onto the shelf, torsos laboring, the atmosphere alive with the grind of pursuing talons. The monstrosity crested the rise, its bulk eclipsing the pale sky, but the broadening terrain offered branches—rifts to the flanks, potential hides. A minion horde flanked them now, crystalline shapes detaching from the creature's conduits like spawned parasites, scurrying over the powder. Terry's gauntlet whined, charge waning; he jammed a new cell home, the snap echoing his pulse. Elara's palm grazed his arm, a fleeting clasp—fidelity in the hold—before she evoked roots to trip the nearest wave. Lirael's eyes narrowed, tempest clouds gathering in her palms, primed for the next swell. The shelf quivered as the creature barreled anew, geothermal springs detonating in sympathy, veils of vapor shrouding the turmoil. Terry elevated his gauntlet, zeroing the lead conduit, the bodily rhythm of combat demanding one more calculated blow amid the thunder.

Terry's gauntlet buzzed, a shrill whir slicing through the geothermal haze. He unleashed the plasma lance, a spear of azure fire that pierced into the monstrosity's lead conduit—a throbbing vein of frost-rimed black ichor pulsing along its flank. The impact erupted in a geyser of steam and splintered crystal, the vein rupturing with a wet crackle like thawing bone. Shards of corrupted ice hailed down, one grazing Kael's shoulder and

embedding deep enough to draw a grunt as blood welled around the frozen barb, numbing his arm to the elbow. The brute staggered, its bulk crashing into a cluster of steaming vents. Superheated water jetted skyward, scalding the air with bursts that peeled hide from the nearest Glacari brutes. They thundered, flesh bubbling into raw blisters that fused with crystalline protrusions, the reek of ozone-laced char flooding the shelf. But the monstrosity didn't fall; it thrashed, tusks gouging furrows in the permafrost, flinging chunks of rime that pelted Elara's barrier. She reinforced her roots with a sharp twist of her wrist, the vines thickening into barbed coils that snagged the debris mid-air, only for the strain to wrench her elbow with a pop, sending a jolt of fire up her arm. "Flank left—channel them into the narrows!" Lirael bellowed, her voice slicing like a gale. She didn't wait for nods; her palms cracked open with electric fury, unleashing a tempest that whipped snow into blinding sheets. The wind screamed through the pursuing horde, slamming crystalline scuttlers against the shelf's edge. Bodies shattered on impact, legs splaying in jagged sprays, but the force hurled one straight into Harlan's chest. The impact caved his ribs with a muffled crunch, forcing a wheeze from his lungs as he dropped to a knee, clutching the dented plate of his armor. Terry peered rearward, his jaw clenching—a flicker of calculation masking the knot in his gut. Harlan waved him off, firing a burst from his rifle that stitched crimson across a hound's maw, the rounds piercing through frost-armored jaws with wet pops. The group forged ahead, boots crunching over refrozen slush as the shelf widened into a basin. Ahead, the terrain dipped into a cradle of jagged spires, where fissures belched faint wisps of vapor. The steaming oasis—Frostveil's fractured heart—lay nestled there, its geothermal pools ringed by twisted pillars of ice that shimmered with unnatural veins of black. "Double time—oasis cover!" Terry called, his breath fogging in sharp bursts. He pivoted, gauntlet weaving a kinetic shield that bloomed like a translucent dome, deflecting a volley of hurled ice shards from the monstrosity. The barrier flexed under the assault, vibrations rattling his teeth, but it held long enough for Elara to lash out with a whip of thorns. The vines coiled around a brute's leg, yanking it off-balance; it crashed face-first into the powder, tusks embedding in the frost with a resonant thunk that vibrated through the ground. They

spilled into the oasis basin, the air thickening with the mineral tang of bubbling springs. Survivors—ragged figures in academy fatigues, faces gaunt from the cold—huddled behind makeshift barricades of piled ice blocks and salvaged drone husks. Kael's eyes lit with grim relief as he spotted them. "Prince! Voss! Thorne—get those hides in line!" Elara slid to a halt beside a wounded archer, her fingers already glowing with verdant light as she pressed a poultice to the man's gashed thigh. The wound wept oily black, rift corruption tendrils worming through the flesh like living ink, fusing skin to exposed bone in pulsating ridges. She grimaced, crushing herbs into the mess; the corruption hissed, retreating with a sizzle that reeked of burnt-sugar stench, but not before the man arched in agony, his gasp echoing like shattered glass. Lirael funneled her tempest into the basin's rim, erecting a whirlwind wall that funneled the horde into kill zones. Hounds leaped through the gale, only to meet Terry's plasma grid—a lattice of searing lines that bisected the pack. Fur ignited in flashes, bodies convulsing as the energy arced through crystalline spines, exploding them in sprays of superheated fluid that pattered like rain on the ice. Rifle fire crackled from the survivors, Harlan's squad adding suppressive bursts that chewed through brute hides, rounds ricocheting off metal-fused plates with metallic pings. One shot caught a hound mid-leap, spinning it into a spring where the scalding water stripped its pelt in steaming sheets, exposing raw muscle that twitched and blackened. "Seal those leaks—now!" Kael roared, pointing to fractures in the ice where oily blackness bubbled up, crystallizing into jagged spines that clawed at the air. Terry knelt by the nearest, gauntlet interfacing with a hasty rune. He channeled a surge, the plasma fusing the edges in a molten seal that glowed blue before hardening. But the effort drained him; sweat beaded on his brow, freezing into rime that cracked with each blink. Elara wove vines across another fissure, the roots delving into the black ooze and constricting with fibrous snaps. The corruption resisted, veins pulsing against the pressure, emitting a low gurgle like choking fluids. Lirael's lightning forked down, cauterizing a third leak in a burst of ozone that made eyes water, the reek clinging to throats like a foul aftertaste. Panting, they converged at the oasis's core—a sunken pedestal half-buried in frost, its surface etched with syndicate runes that pulsed faintly. Terry jammed his

gauntlet into the interface port, the connection sparking as data flooded his visor. Holographic schematics bloomed: blueprints of a multiversal engine, its core laced with rift corruption conduits designed to amplify corruption across realms. Veins of black ichor snaked through the diagrams, mutating gears into flesh-wrapped horrors, all stamped with a signature—his father's, twisted into something profane. Elara leaned in, her breath catching as she traced a rune. "This... it's weaponizing the corruption. Turning rifts into engines of spread." Her fingers clenched the pedestal's edge, knuckles blanching—not fear, but a simmering resolve that hardened her gaze. Lirael's stormweave flickered in her palms, casting shadows. "Your father's work? He built this nightmare?" The question hung, laced with accusation, her eyes flicking to Terry like a blade testing a seam. He yanked the gauntlet free, the slate downloading complete with a chime. "He warned against it. They twisted it." His voice stayed even, but his free hand balled into a fist, nails biting palm—a tell of the hubris cracking under the weight. Kael slapped a fresh mag into his rifle, probing the horizon. "Explanations later. We've bought minutes, not hours." The respite fractured. The ground heaved, a seismic groan rumbling from the oasis depths. Cracks spiderwebbed across the ice, widening into a yawning maw. Black ichor surged upward, the rift corruption coalescing in veils of shimmering oil that slathered the air with its acrid reek. Geothermal vents erupted in gouts of steam laced with crystalline flecks, scalding the nearest survivor; he screamed as the vapor blistered his face into raw welts, vision blurring from the corrosive mist. From the breach clambered the abomination—a titanic horror veined in frost and corruption, its form a hulking fusion of glacial bulk and writhing tendrils. Towering twice the monstrosity's height, it dragged a crown of icicle spines that scraped furrows in the basin floor, each step pulverizing stone into powder that billowed like ash. Minions spawned from its underbelly—chittering swarms of scuttlers with legs like serrated blades, their carapaces glistening with oily residue that dripped and sizzled on contact. "Evac—flank the vents!" Terry bellowed, gauntlet priming a plasma burst that sheared a tendril clean. Ichor sprayed, freezing mid-air into razor shards that sliced across a squad member's arm, parting flesh in a deep gash that wept black-tinged blood. Elara summoned a barrier of thorns, the vines arching to shield the retreat, but

the abomination's claw smashed through, splintering roots and hurling her backward. She hit a spring's edge, the impact jarring her spine with a thud that left her vision spotting, ribs protesting with sharp twinges. Lirael unleashed a lightning cascade, bolts chaining across the swarm and electrocuting clusters in convulsing heaps—their bodies locking rigid before shattering, but the drain left her staggering, knees buckling as vertigo spun the world. Kael fired from the hip, rounds hammering the beast's joint; a lucky hit cracked the frost plating, exposing pulsating veins, but the recoil jammed his shoulder, a deep ache blooming with each shot. Survivors scrambled, dragging wounded over the fracturing ice, one slipping into a vent—his cry cut short by a bubbling plunge that echoed with wet finality. Terry fired another lance, the plasma carving a smoking trench across the abomination's flank, but it lunged, pseudopod whipping out to clip Harlan. The blow lifted him off his feet, slamming him into a spire with a crack that split the ice—and possibly his collarbone, his roar dissolving into a pained wheeze. The group bolted for the basin's far rim, boots slipping on ichor-slick frost as vents detonated behind them. Steam veils choked the air, minion claws scraping pursuit. Terry glanced back once—the horror's maw gaping, exhaling a blizzard of crystalline barbs that forced a desperate weave of his shield, the strain burning through his reserves like acid in his veins. They crested the rise, the frozen expanse stretching ahead, but the ground trembled anew, promising no easy flight.

Boots ground over brittle rime as the group charged down the far slope, the gale-lashed stretch of Frostveil unfolding like a fractured porcelain ocean beneath a sky bruised violet by endless auroras. Brimstone-tinged vapor from concealed fissures raked their lungs, bearing the bitter tang of rift-taint—ozone blended with something cloying, like scorching toffee. Terry's gauntlet buzzed, its power levels stuttering low, while he probed the skyline for any trace of the armored leader's path. Behind them, the abomination's thunder rattled the atmosphere, a guttural bellow that quivered through the glacier like a remote cascade. Elara clutched her bow tighter, barbs retracting from her palms where they'd bitten during the bulwark weave. She cast a sideways look at Terry, her jaw clenched as she whispered, "Your plasma gained

us instants, not sanctuary. We need shelter—those springs are spewing more than mist." Her words held no blame, just the stark fact of someone who'd witnessed thickets reduced to cinders by unrestrained power. Lirael braced on her staff, respiration labored, the tempestweave's rebound leaving her digits numb and spasming. She pointed toward a knot of serrated pinnacles ahead—distorted relics of ancient glaciers, laced with dim, throbbing dark lines. "There. Elevated terrain. Compel the thing to funnel." Her voice splintered on the final word, but she straightened, hoisting her satchel higher despite the grimace etching her forehead. Kael dipped his head once, crisp and efficient, his rifle slung across his sound shoulder as he aided a hobbling holdout. "Team, wedge array. Gaze on sides—pests disperse like vermin." He slapped the man's back, a quick motion that steadied the recruit's falter, showing his practical trust in trained accuracy over frenzy. The shudder intensified, cleaving the glacier in a lattice of splits that ejected jets of blistering vapor. Terry twisted, discharging a kinetic surge from his gauntlet—a rippling bulwark that distorted the atmosphere and repelled a salvo of crystalline spikes hurtling from the abomination's jaws. The collision sent waves through the shield, fracturing it like pane under strain, and fragments burrowed in the rime with sizzles, etching divots that steamed and refroze in uneven basins. One spike nicked a team member's leg, ripping through cloth and eliciting a gasp of agony as crimson welled, dark and viscous. They dashed for the pinnacles, the earth lurching beneath them. Harlan, gripping his flank where the pseudopod had struck, barked a chuckle through clenched teeth. "Keep advancing, or that thing'll turn us into frozen statues." His spare hand steadied a dropped rifle, handing it to another without slowing, a silent affirmation of their collective resolve. The abomination crested the rise, its titanic bulk—towering slabs of rime-crusted chitin overlaid on coiling conduits—eclipsing the auroras. Pseudopods cracked out, each a flailing bundle of frozen whips that uprooted pinnacles in bursts of pulverized glacier. Pests flooded from gashes in its underbelly: scuttlers clattering on blade-legs, their slick drippings carving sizzling paths that ignited pockets of trapped methane with azure flares. The atmosphere thickened with their rasping, a metallic scrape like talons on rusted iron, overwhelming the gale's scream. Elara dropped to one knee behind a toppled pinnacle, roots

thrusting from her gauntlets to loop around its base, mooring it as an improvised rampart. Creepers surged outward, barbed barriers snagging the front scuttlers—legs skewering shells, ichor bubbling and congealing into brittle barbs that splintered under their own mass. “Hold the front here,” she shouted, her aim unwavering as she discharged an arrow tipped with binding resin; it struck a pseudopod, flowering into a tangle of spikes that slowed its curve, granting the team a pulse to rally. Lirael evoked a maelstrom, gales screaming as lightning leaped from her staff in serrated links. Strikes pounded the pests, superheating their slick shells until they detonated in bursts of mist and dark slurry, hollows forming where the hits landed the glacier—shallow depressions that split wider under the abomination’s mass. She wavered after the release, planting her staff to brace herself, and whispered, “Expenditure on vermin. Strike the nucleus next.” Her gaze darted to Terry, a nod pressing him to spearhead the retaliation. Terry’s thoughts whirled, the data slate’s bulk in his satchel a nagging drag. Those diagrams—his father’s script in the syndicate’s engine, contorting Nexus-weaves to inject Riftblight like propellant into multiversal conduits—flashed in his mind, but he buried it. Concentrate now. He primed his gauntlet, plasma coiling in azure arcs. “Kael, quell the sides. Elara, snare its legs. Lirael—overload the hinges.” His voice allowed no dispute, digits flexing as if already sketching the weave. Rifle fire crackled from Kael’s team, slugs gnawing into the abomination’s rime shielding with bursts of mist and splintered glacier. A direct strike on a conduit made it spasm, dark ooze ejecting in a fountain that flash-froze mid-spurt, cascading down as perilous sleet that battered the group. One holdout evaded too sluggishly; pellets gashed his arm, compelling him to wrap it with a shredded strip of cloak as they advanced. The monster pounced, a pseudopod pounding a pinnacle into rubble. Rubble flew—slabs of glacier the size of fists, burrowing in the rime with thuds that echoed like mallets. Terry rolled aside, the earth quivering as the appendage hollowed the spot he’d vacated, ejecting a plume of powdered snow that stung his eyes. He countered with a plasma bolt, the beam piercing the atmosphere in a scorching line; it struck the pseudopod’s root, fusing chitin in a sizzle of superheated mist, the severed tip spasming and sealing in a puddle of molten dross. Elara’s creepers cracked out, looping around the abomination’s

forelimb like living cables, barbs sinking deep to moor and rend. The tension ripped at her roots, crimson seeping from splits in her gauntlets, but she endured, sinews taut as the monster dragged her a pace before the grip took. “It’s mooring—tear it loose!” Her voice sliced through the clamor, a crisp directive that spurred Lirael. Lightning swelled again, Lirael’s maelstrom concentrating into a fork that leaped to the hinge Elara targeted. Electricity leaped across the creepers, conducting through the ichor and detonating the shielding in a cascade of fragments—rime and dark crystal alike flying outward, carving shallow lacerations across bare flesh. The appendage folded, the abomination toppling sideways with a boom that split the stretch further, pests dispersing in the shockwave. Harlan seized the opening, his team advancing with salvos that riddled the fallen monster’s underbelly. Slugs bored into spawning springs, jamming them with burst sacs that collapsed in jets of foul mist, the rasping silenced in fleshy snaps. But the triumph tasted sour; the abomination’s spasm split the glacier beneath them, a chasm gaping wide—serrated borders exhaling frigid gusts laced with the burnt-sugar reek. “Bridge it—now!” Terry commanded, deploying his kinetic shield as a ramp, the force field buzzing taut over the gap. The team charged across, soles thudding on the unseen span, vibrations from the monster’s recovery threatening to destabilize it. Elara withdrew her creepers with a wrench, coiling them back as she crossed last, her bulwark barbs retracting in a whisper of foliage against the shield’s radiance. They cleared the chasm as it broadened behind, engulfing a knot of scuttlers in a tumble of reverberating cracks. The frozen field stretched onward, but the abomination dragged itself up, conduits throbbing brighter, evoking fresh pests from the rift’s jaws. Terry drew the slate from his satchel mid-stride, its holographic display stuttering to life—diagrams of the engine, his father’s annotations glowing: “Stabilize with taint infusion. Controlled cataclysm.” Lirael peered over his shoulder, her respiration clouding the projection. “Your old man’s blueprint for doom. Leader’s constructing it here—Frostveil’s the proving ground.” She tapped a glyph, magnifying a node diagram, her motion exact despite the quiver in her hand. Kael grunted endorsement, reloading with a metallic snap. “Means we strike the origin. No more fleeing.” His gaze swept the skyline, spotting dim lights—syndicate flares?—winking through the auroral fog. Elara

nocked another arrow, probing the petrified thicket bordering the field. “Pause is illusion. Those hounds—scent’s shifting.” Her nostrils flared, catching the ozone tang intensifying on the gale. The team advanced, injuries pulsing—slashes wrapped hastily, scorches smeared with Elara’s balms that dulled but didn’t mend. Remote thunders pierced the gale: Voidtouched Hounds, their blade-tusked jaws dislocating in packs, pelts encrusted with slick crystals that snared the violet radiance like fractured stars. The abomination’s bellow ebbed, but the shudders endured, glacier groaning as if the realm itself splintered. Terry stowed the slate, gauntlet recharging with a low whir. They crested another rise, the steaming oasis remnants visible below—fractured pools bubbling amid wreckage. But as they descended, the earth split abruptly, a new wound ejecting in a jet of black-veined rime. From it clawed something enormous, its shape coalescing in fragments of glacier and taint, eyes like luminous splits fixing on them. The atmosphere thickened with its exhalation—a blast of subzero gale that fractured bulwarks and froze respiration in lungs.

Chapter 12: Claws from the Fractured Ice

The splintered glaciers of Frostveil groaned under the weight of their own fracturing, enormous slabs of ice calving into gaping chasms that exhaled plumes of superheated steam from concealed geothermal fissures. Terry Prince scraped across a slick ridge, his boots grinding through rime-crusted shards as the pursuing monstrosity’s guttural bellows reverberated behind them. The brute—a towering mass of veined ice and coiling dark tendrils—barreled forward, its titanic frame splintering bergs in its path. Flanking it, a pack of Voidtouched Hounds loped with unnatural grace, their pelts a mottled gray that absorbed the pale light, leaving trails of desiccated snow in their wake. “Forge ahead!” Terry bellowed, his gauntlet buzzing as he twisted his wrist to unleash a bolt of superheated plasma. The projectile streaked blue-white, crashing into the lead hound’s flank. Sinew sizzled and burst, the collision carving a smoking crater that bared pulsating veins beneath, but the creature only snarled and pressed on, its eyes flickering with oily taint. Elara Voss vaulted

a fissure, her fingers digging into the rough bark of a summoned vine that cracked out to snag a hound's leg. The tendril cinched tight, thorns skewering hide and drawing ichor that froze mid-drip into serrated spikes. "Your gadgets are flashy, Terry, but they don't hold!" she snapped, her breath clouding in the biting air. She wrenched back, the vine yanking the beast off-balance and flinging it into a steam vent, where blistering geysers erupted and boiled its pelt to rags. Lirael Thorne whirled mid-stride, her hands weaving arcs of crackling energy. A gale howled from her palms, whipping shards of ice into a blinding barrage that pelted the abomination's forelimbs. "Less bickering, more focus!" she growled, her jaw clenched as she sidestepped a hound's lunge, its jaws snapping inches from her cloak. The wind shoved the pack rearward, embedding crystalline flecks in their muzzles, but the effort left her staggering, a fresh gash on her arm from an earlier skirmish oozing blood that froze in crimson beads. Kael and the academy holdouts—three ragged survivors clutching depleted rifles—spread out behind them, their torsos laboring. One holdout, a wiry cadet named Mira, limped from a twisted ankle, her face pale as she fired a burst into the snow to cover their retreat. "Breaches are broadening ahead!" Kael shouted over the clamor, his voice gravelly from inhaled frost. "We hit that basin oasis or we're done!" The group charged down a ravine, walls of blue-veined ice towering like fractured cathedral spires. Geothermal fissures snaked through the ground, belching sulfurous vapors that seared their lungs and melted boot soles into sticky sludge. Terry's gauntlet probed the terrain, its blue flicker seeking stable footing amid the chaos. A hound crested the ridge above, its leap bridging the gap until Elara's arrow—tipped with a glowing herbal venom—thudded into its chest. The shaft burrowed deep, the poison fizzing as it corroded sinew, sending the beast tumbling into a fissure where it shattered on submerged rocks below. But the abomination adapted, its tendrils elongating to bridge the divide. One whip-like appendage cracked out, coiling around Mira's leg and yanking her toward the edge. She screamed, firing wildly as the squad turned. Terry twisted, his kinetic shield snapping into a shimmering dome that absorbed the tendril's impact with a resonant thud, the force rippling through his arms and numbing his fingers. "Elara, snare it!" he commanded, hubris edging his tone as he primed another plasma shot. She rolled

her eyes but complied, slamming her palm to the ice. Thorny vines thrust from fissures, roots burrowing through frozen soil to ensnare the tendril. They squeezed, barbs rasping against oily blackness, eliciting a bellow that dislodged cascades from the ravine walls. Chunks of ice rained down, forcing Lirael to evoke a maelstrom barrier that deflected the debris, her sinews straining as sweat beaded on her brow despite the cold. Deeper in, the air thickened with delirious ice phantoms—translucent wolves that solidified mid-charge, their forms flickering from mirage to menace. One phantom lunged at Kael, phasing through his rifle before manifesting claws that raked his shoulder, drawing blood that steamed on the ground. "These aren't illusions—they're turning real!" he grunted, slamming the butt of his weapon into its skull, cracking ethereal ice that sprayed like shattered glass. Lirael channeled a lightning bolt, the arc forking across the ravine to strike multiple phantoms. Electricity leaped along their forms, superheating vapor within until they burst in puffs of acrid steam, leaving hollows pocked with fused quartz. But the effort drained her; she slumped against a berg, clutching her side where taint had scorched her earlier. Resources dwindled—Terry's gauntlet beeped a low-energy warning, Elara's vine summons wilting from the barren soil, Lirael's tempests sputtering with fatigue. The holdouts' rifles clicked empty, forcing them to scavenge shards of ice as improvised clubs. As they crested a rise toward the basin oasis—a steaming pool ringed by jagged spires—the ground heaved. A wound tore open beneath them, oily black rift corruption seeping upward like molten tar, crystallizing into pulsating shards that clawed at the air. From the wound erupted a new horror: a rift-born titan, its form a titanic claw of layered ice and blackened chitin, each segment armored in frozen veins that throbbed with inner fire. The claw slammed down, splintering the glacier and unleashing a freezing gale that screamed like a thousand blades. Gales battered the group, flinging Mira into a snowdrift where she gasped, frostbite creeping across her exposed skin. The gale carried flecks of taint that stung like acid, corroding cloak edges and pitting metal buckles. "Brace!" Terry yelled, his gauntlet projecting a wider shield that warped under the assault, splits webbing its energy field. The claw flexed, secondary talons raking the ice and sending shudders that buckled the ravine. Voidtouched Hounds swarmed from

the wound's edges, their thunders harmonizing with the gale to disorient, shadows lengthening unnaturally to trip the fleeing allies. Elara rooted herself, vines surging to wrap the claw's base. Thorns bit deep, drawing spurts of ichor that flash-froze into brittle armor, but the brute countered by slamming downward, shattering her growths and hurling splinters that gashed her arms. She bit back a curse, blood dripping to sizzle in a fissure. Lirael countered with a maelstrom torrent, lightning chaining from her fingertips to the claw's hinges. Bolts exploded against chitin, melting segments into dross that dripped and refroze in warped shapes, but the recoil jolted her rearward, her soles sliding toward a chasm. Kael and the holdouts formed a firing line at the oasis edge, their scavenged blades and remaining ammo chipping at hound flanks. One cadet drove an ice-shard spear into a hound's maw, the creature's void-tendrils latching onto his arm, draining color from his skin until it grayed like ash. He collapsed, vitality ebbing as the pack closed in. Terry targeted the claw's core, plasma bolts hammering in rapid succession. Each hit vaporized layers, creating vents of steam and baring throbbing veins beneath. The colossus reared, its gale intensifying to whip snow into blinding walls, but Terry pressed forward, shield stuttering as it absorbed gales that bent nearby spires like reeds. Amid the fray, Elara's boot struck something buried in the snow—a syndicate beacon, its obsidian surface buzzing with embedded runes, amplifying the wound's throbs. Holographic emitters flickered to life, projecting diagrams of a multiversal engine, conduits of taint threading through dimensional maps tied to Terry's father's research. "There!" she pointed, vines shielding her as she lunged for it. "It's fueling this—shut it down!" The group closed in, battling through the gale. Lirael scattered phantoms with a final swell, her hands trembling as electricity arced wildly. Terry overrode the beacon's locks with his gauntlet, plasma feedback scorching his palms, while Elara severed connecting tendrils and Kael bashed at crystalline guards. The device whirred in protest, wounds destabilizing as seals engaged. But the claw fully emerged, its titanic form—a leviathan of ice-sheathed horror—thrusting upward with earth-shaking force. Portals ripped open in the rebound, churning maelstroms of distorted space that yanked at limbs and gear. Terry's shield splintered in a burst of sparks, hurling him toward one maw.

Elara's vines snapped, pulling her into another. Lirael vanished in a lightning-laced swirl, the holdouts scattering like leaves. As the leviathan's bellow drowned the gale, its bulk breached the surface fully, talons gouging the glacier and heralding swarms from deeper voids. The basin oasis fractured, steam exploding in geysers that masked the team's vanishing cries.

Terry's world inverted in a vortex of fractured light, the portal's maw clamping around him like a vice of warped gravity. He tumbled out onto a jagged spur of ice overlooking the basin, the leviathan's roar vibrating through his bones as steam plumes rocketed skyward from the shattered oasis below. His gauntlet sparked erratically, plasma conduits overheating from the shield's collapse, but he rolled to his knees, boots crunching into frost-crusted shards. The air thickened with the acrid tang of riftblight, oily tendrils snaking from fresh cracks in the glacier. Below, the titanic horror heaved its bulk free, a colossal behemoth of sheathed ice and pulsating veins, its hide cracking like thunder as segments of black crystal erupted along its flanks. Talons the size of siege engines gouged furrows into the ice shelf, sending slabs calving into the chasm. Voidtouched Hounds swarmed from the rents it tore, their forms blurring into packs that loped with unnatural speed, maws gaping to exhale gales that stripped flesh from bone. Elara materialized in a tangle of thorns nearby, her vines whipping free from the portal's grip to lash at an incoming hound. She drove her heel into the snow, anchoring herself as the beast lunged; her arrow loosed with a twang, piercing its eye socket and erupting in a spray of ichor that sizzled on the frost. "Flank it high—don't cluster!" she barked, her gaze flicking to Terry while she nocked another shaft, the string creaking under tension. Her stance widened, roots burrowing into the ice to stabilize a makeshift barricade, signaling her push for elevated ground over a direct charge. From a steaming fissure to their left, Lirael burst forth in a crackle of ozone, her cloak singed at the edges, hands clenched into fists that sparked with residual charge. She staggered, then planted her feet, unleashing a bolt that arced across the basin and shattered a hound's forelimb into frozen splinters. The impact hurled shards like shrapnel, peppering the pack and forcing them to scatter. "Wastes energy on the small fry," she muttered through gritted teeth, her fingers

flexing as if testing the air's conductivity, her body angling toward the leviathan's rising flank rather than the hounds—her vote for prioritizing the source clear in the deliberate pivot. Kael and the holdouts rematerialized in a ragged cluster on a lower ridge, the instructor barking orders as they shook off disorientation. One cadet clutched a gashed arm, blood freezing in rivulets, but Kael shouldered his rifle, sighting down the barrel to rake a hound's hide with suppressive bursts that chipped away crystalline armor. "Form up on the prodigy—cover the weaves!" he roared, his free hand gesturing sharply toward Terry, emphasizing integration over isolation as the group shuffled into a loose wedge. Terry ignored the sting in his palms, rerouting power from his failing shield to the gauntlet's core. He thrust his arm forward, lances of superheated plasma streaking out in a fan that bisected a hound mid-leap. The bolts bored through, vaporizing flesh into steam plumes that condensed into razor-edged hail, which pelted the surrounding pack. The leviathan bellowed, its gale surging anew—a howling front that uprooted ice spires and hurled them like battering rams. Terry dodged one, the projectile embedding in the snow behind him with a cratering thud, then countered with a sustained beam that scored a glowing trench across the beast's emerging shoulder. Molten rivulets cascaded down its hide, hissing as they met the frost and flash-freezing into brittle spikes that cracked under the creature's own weight. The group converged on the spur, weaving through geothermal fissures that belched scalding vapor, the heat warping the air into mirages. Elara's vines surged ahead, thick as cables, coiling around a hound's legs and yanking it into a fissure where it thrashed, scales melting in the superheated depths. The pseudopod she summoned next— a thorny appendage from the riftblight's edge—writhed in defiance, but she hacked at it with a conjured blade of bark and sap, severing the link in a gush of oily fluid that corroded the ice into bubbling pits. Hallucinatory ice phantoms materialized amid the chaos, translucent figures of Sundering warriors lunging with spears that solidified mid-swing into jagged lances. One phantom's thrust grazed Lirael's side, drawing a line of blood that froze instantly, but she retaliated with a tempest that coalesced from the gale itself—winds whipping into a vortex laced with lightning forks. The strike hammered the phantom's form, shattering it into a cascade of harmless flakes

that dusted the snow, while the backlash scorched a hound's flank black, its hide peeling in charred strips. Resources dwindled as the skirmish dragged; a holdout's blaster overheated, venting plasma in erratic bursts that singed his own sleeve, forcing him to discard it for a conduit rod that hummed with unstable energy. Kael reloaded with a curse, his clip half-empty, while Terry's gauntlet whined in protest, heat sinks glowing red. Injuries mounted—a cadet's leg buckled from a hound's rake, tendon severed and trailing frozen gore, and Elara winced as a phantom's edge nicked her thigh, blood welling dark against her leathers. Pushing toward the leviathan's base, they navigated a labyrinth of fissures, steam jets erupting like geysers to scald exposed skin. Terry leaped a gap, his boots skidding on refreezing melt, and fired a lance that pierced the beast's talon joint. The claw buckled with a resonant crack, toppling a section of its limb that crashed into the ice, splintering the surface and widening the chasm. Black veins pulsed in the wound, spewing dross that crept toward them like living tar, crystallizing into barriers that Elara shattered with vine-wrapped fists, the impacts sending thorns embedding in the growths like barbs in flesh. Lirael vaulted a fissure, her winds propelling her arc, and channeled a stormweave that funneled the leviathan's own gale back at it. Lightning rods stabbed downward, fusing with the plasma Terry fed into the maelstrom; the hybrid force struck the beast's underbelly, excavating a crater that exposed throbbing conduits. Ichor jetted out, splattering the snow in viscous pools that warped the terrain into tumorous ridges, but the group pressed, Kael's squad laying down fire to pin hounds at bay. Deeper in the fray, amid the beast's thrashing, Terry's boot unearthed another anomaly—a secondary beacon, half-buried in the upheaval, its runes flickering with the same syndicate sigils as the first. This one thrummed louder, veins linking it to the leviathan's core, amplifying the rifts with pulses that tore micro-tears in the air. "Another amplifier—tear it apart!" Terry growled, his gauntlet interfacing despite the feedback that blistered his skin. Elara nodded curtly, her vines plunging into the snow to uproot the device, roots grinding against obsidian casing with splintering snaps. She glanced at Lirael's arcing bolts, then adjusted her weave to channel the strikes through the beacon's frame, her shoulders rolling in a gesture that urged precision over raw power.

The leviathan sensed the threat, its remaining claws raking the ice to summon reinforcements—swarms of crystalline scuttlers skittering from the depths, mandibles clicking as they converged. Lirael dispersed a cluster with a ground-shaking thunderclap, the shockwave pulverizing their shells into powder that clogged the air, but one latched onto a holdout's boot, injecting blight that spread veins across his calf. He hacked it free with a blade, the limb swelling grotesquely, yet he limped forward, rifle barking to cover the beacon's exposure. Kael bashed a scuttler from his path, his rifle butt cracking its carapace in a spray of shards, then turned to Terry. "Overload it—make it count," he urged, his stance bracing as if readying for the blast, revealing his stake in a decisive strike over prolonged attrition. Terry complied, diverting full power; plasma flooded the beacon's circuits, runes igniting in chain reactions that propagated back to the leviathan. The beast convulsed, its form shuddering as internal veins ruptured, spewing gouts of frozen ichor that entombed hounds in crystalline prisons. Elara's vines bound the device's remnants, compressing them into a pulped mass that sank into the fissure, while Lirael's tempest sealed the cracks with electrified winds, arcing barriers that vaporized encroaching tendrils. But the overload backlashed wildly. The leviathan's core fractured, unleashing a cascade of destabilizing portals that warped the glacier's edge. One yawned beneath Terry, sucking at his legs with gravitational tugs; he fired a kinetic pulse from his gauntlet to propel himself clear, but the force hurled him toward another rift. Elara's roots snagged her waist, yet they tore free in the suction, flinging her into a swirling vortex. Lirael tried to anchor with a wind barrier, her hands outstretched, but the gale inverted, dragging her in a spiral of sparks. Kael shoved a cadet from a portal's brink, only for the maw to claim him instead, his shout cut short. The holdouts fared no better, vanishing in bursts of distorted light as the leviathan's colossal frame stabilized, its roar echoing across the fracturing expanse. Hounds bayed in triumph, loping through the steam as new voids yawned, spilling horrors from abyssal depths. Terry twisted mid-air, gauntlet firing a harpoon line that embedded in an ice outcrop, yanking him to a halt just as the portal spat him into the chasm's mist. He dangled there, scanning the chaos, as the beast's silhouette loomed larger, its advance cracking the world beneath.

Terry's gauntlet whirred, reeling in the harpoon line with mechanical grit. Muscles burned as he hauled his body upward, boots scraping against sheer ice that flaked away in brittle chunks. The chasm's mist clawed at his face, thick with the acrid tang of superheated steam rising from unseen fissures below. A low rumble vibrated through the rock, syncing with the leviathan's distant bellow—a sound like grinding tectonic plates laced with wet, tearing flesh. He crested the ledge, rolling onto fractured glacier in a skid that sprayed frost across his visor. The world tilted, aurora ribbons flickering overhead like faulty wiring. Portals dotted the expanse, ragged tears belching distorted howls and glimpses of churning voids. One rift vomited Elara onto a nearby spur; she landed in a crouch, vines erupting from her palms to anchor her slide, coiling around a jutting berg. She snapped a glance toward Terry's position, her jaw set as she wrenched a thorned whip free from her belt— a silent endorsement of immediate counterstrike, no time for regrouping chatter. Lirael's portal spat her out farther afield, tumbling her into a snowdrift that exploded in a gale of powder. She surged up, hands crackling with static, unleashing a bolt that arced toward a loping Void-touched Hound. The beast yelped, its frost-rimed fur singeing black, but it shook off the hit and charged. Lirael pivoted, her stance widening as if to channel a broader storm—betraying her preference for area denial over pinpoint shots amid the scattering threats. The leviathan loomed, its colossal bulk heaving forward on segmented limbs that pulverized ice into powder. Cracks spiderwebbed outward from each step, exhaling plumes of freezing gale that numbed Terry's exposed skin. Hounds flanked it, packs of sinewy shadows with eyes like fractured quartz, baying as they bounded through the steam. One vaulted a crevasse, jaws unhinging to reveal needle fangs dripping oily blight. Terry fired his gauntlet. A lance of superheated plasma streaked out, slamming into the lead hound's flank. Flesh vaporized in a hiss, the impact hurling the creature sideways into a steam vent where it sizzled and burst. Ozone stung the air, mingling with the metallic bite of fear on his tongue. He rolled to his feet, kinetic shield humming to life—a shimmering barrier that deflected a hurled ice shard from another beast. Elara's whip lashed out, thorns embedding in a hound's haunch. She yanked, roots bursting from the ground to drag it down, crushing its ribs with a

wet snap. “Flank the big one—pin its legs!” she called, her voice cutting through the wind like a blade, underscoring her tactical lean toward immobilization before escalation. The glacier shuddered. A new rift tore open at the leviathan’s base, wider than the last, spewing a freezing gale that howled like a thousand shattering panes. From the maw clambered a rift-born horror: an immense form of layered ice and pulsing veins, its emerging claws gouging furrows deep enough to swallow a squad. Pseudopods of crystalline blight whipped out, lashing the air with cracks that echoed like thunderclaps. Lirael bellowed a incantation, her arms sweeping in a wide arc. A torrent of lightning erupted, forking into tempests that hammered the horror’s claws. Bolts exploded against the surface, shattering segments into razor shards that rained down, embedding in the ice with sizzling impacts. The gale intensified, shoving her back a step; she dug her heels in, fingers splaying wider to amplify the storm— a gesture revealing her commitment to overwhelming force, even as it drained her. Terry dashed toward Elara, boots crunching over steaming cracks where geothermal fissures belched scalding vapor. The heat warred with the cold, turning his breath to fog that burned his lungs. A hound lunged from the mist; he sidestepped, plasma lance piercing its chest in a burst of superheated gore. “We need high ground—those vents are venting corruption!” he barked, pointing to a ridge where black veins pulsed beneath the surface, amplifying the rifts. They converged on the spur, Lirael weaving through the gale with wind-assisted leaps. The horror’s claws fully emerged now, each a hulking scythe longer than a transport, scraping across the glacier and sending tremors that buckled the ice. Hounds swarmed in its wake, dodging Elara’s entangling vines that snared two mid-leap, squeezing until chitin cracked and ichor sprayed. A squad remnant staggered from a collapsing portal—three holdouts, faces gaunt under frost-rimed hoods, rifles clutched tight. One clutched his side, blood seeping through fingers, but he fired a burst into a hound’s maw, the rounds punching through with meaty thuds. No words; just a nod toward the ridge, his rifle canting upward as if voting for elevation to control the field. The group pressed into the fissures. Scalding geysers erupted sporadically, jets of near-boiling water laced with blight that corroded armor on contact. Terry’s shield flared, absorbing a splash that hissed against the energy field.

Hallucinatory ice phantoms materialized then—ethereal figures of Sundering warriors, blades materializing from mist into solid edges that whistled through the air. One phantom lunged at Lirael, sword cleaving toward her shoulder. She countered with a lightning-charged palm strike, the impact shattering the illusion in a spray of evaporating frost, but not before it grazed her arm, drawing a thin line of blood. She winced, then hurled a tempest bolt at the next, vaporizing it mid-swing—her gritted teeth signaling approval of aggressive disruption to break the phantasms' rhythm. Elara knelt amid a cluster of fissures, her hands pressing into the steaming earth. Vines surged up, thick as cables, wrapping a phantom's legs and yanking it into a geyser where it dissolved in acidic steam. "These aren't random—the rifts are feeding off something buried," she said, her eyes narrowing at a faint glow pulsing from a crevice, her probe with a vine tip deliberate, testing for structural weak points over blind assault. Dwindling resources bit hard. Terry's gauntlet beeped a low-energy warning; plasma reserves flickered at half. Lirael's storms weakened, sparks sputtering before reigniting. The holdout with the wound slumped against an ice wall, firing sporadic rounds that pinged off the horror's hide, each shot slower, his reload fumbled—yet he braced his shoulder, aiming for the beast's joints, favoring precision to conserve ammo. The leviathan pursued, its tread pulverizing the ridge's edge. The new horror's form bulked larger, veins throbbing with oily black that seeped into the fissures, widening them into yawning gaps. Terry spotted it then: a buried syndicate beacon, half-submerged in a scalding pool, its obelisk humming with rune-etched metal that amplified the gales. Holographic flickers danced across its surface—schematics of a multiversal engine, veins linking to Terry's father's twisted weaves. " That's the amplifier!" Terry roared, leaping across a fissure. His boots skidded on slick ice, the heat from below singeing his soles. He fired a kinetic pulse to steady his landing, the recoil jarring his arm. Hounds closed in, a pack of five vaulting the gaps with eerie grace. Elara's vines lashed out in a frenzy, ensnaring two and flinging them into the pool where they boiled alive, skins bubbling. Lirael summoned a gale wall, winds howling to buffet the rest, slamming one against a phantom that shattered on impact—her hands trembling slightly as she held the barrier, a sign of her push for defensive layering to

buy seal time. The holdouts laid suppressive fire, rounds chewing into the horror's claws, chipping crystalline layers that clattered down like falling glass. The wounded one coughed, blood flecking his glove, but he chambered another round, sighting the beacon—indicating trust in a targeted overload strategy. Terry reached the beacon first, gauntlet interfacing with a hiss of sparking circuits. Data flooded his visor: engine activation sequences, corruption channels primed for cross-realm spread. The horror's claw slammed down nearby, the shockwave hurling him sideways. He rolled, plasma lance erupting to sever a probing pseudopod; it writhed, spraying blight that ate into the ice with corrosive fizz. Elara bound the claw's base with thorny coils, roots burrowing deep to anchor and squeeze, veins bursting under pressure. "Seal it now—before it syncs with the engine!" she urged, her whip cracking to fell a phantom mid-lunge, emphasizing rapid closure over probing deeper intel. Lirael channeled her tempest directly into the obelisk, lightning forking along its runes. Arcs danced, melting conduits in explosive pops that filled the air with burnt wiring stench. The gale from the horror intensified, whipping snow into blinding sheets, but she pressed forward, feet sliding yet holding—her stance a vote for fused assault to fracture the core. Terry diverted all power. Plasma flooded the beacon, igniting internal chains that propagated cracks across its frame. The device bucked, runes exploding in sequence, feedback lancing back to the horror. Its colossal form convulsed, claws retracting in spasms as frozen ichor geysered from fissures. But the seal fractured reality. Destabilizing portals yawned anew, gravitational pulls yanking at limbs. One swallowed a holdout whole, his rifle clattering into the void. Elara's vines tore free under suction; she twisted, firing a thorned grapple toward Terry, but the rift claimed her mid-air. Lirael anchored with a wind tether, sparks flying, yet the inversion dragged her down. Terry fired his harpoon again, line whipping toward an outcrop—but the horror fully awakened, its immense bulk rising from the ice with a roar that split the glacier. Claws raked the air, heralding swarms spilling from deeper voids: chitinous horrors with glowing maws, lurching toward the scattered survivors. Terry's line snapped taut, yanking him across a chasm as the first invader lunged, its jaws snapping inches from his boot.

Terry's boots skidded across the jagged ice shelf, the harpoon line jerking him to a halt just shy of a yawning crevasse. Frostbite nipped at his exposed fingers, but he yanked the cord free with a mechanical whine, gauntlet servos straining. Below, the chasm exhaled a guttural rumble— the colossal horror's bulk shifting, cracking the glacier like brittle bone. Shards rained down, pinging off his shield with metallic twangs. He pivoted, plasma rifle humming to life. The invader lunged again, a chitinous brute twice his height, its maw aglow with bioluminescent slime that dripped and sizzled on the snow. Jaws clamped empty air where his leg had been a heartbeat prior. Terry fired. A lance of superheated plasma speared its thorax, erupting in a spray of viscous ichor that steamed and curdled, filling the air with acrid ozone and the sickly sweet rot of burnt sugar. The thing staggered, legs splaying like splintered rebar, but more swarmed from the rift's maw—lurching silhouettes against the gale, their carapaces glistening with oily Riftblight that fused jagged ice to exoskeletons. "Elara! Lirael!" His voice cut through the howl, visor scanning for heat signatures. Static interference from the portals garbled comms, but a faint blip flickered—Elara, pinned fifty meters east, vines lashing at a pair of hounds that circled her like wolves scenting blood. She twisted, thorned whip cracking to ensnare a hound's forelimb. The appendage snapped with a wet crunch, blight-veins pulsing black as they hemorrhaged. "Here—flank them!" Her call was sharp, laced with the strain of holding ground, no room for debate on splitting focus. A geothermal fissure belched steam nearby, scalding the air and melting snow into treacherous slush that slurped at her boots. Terry charged, boots crunching through crust. He leaped a fissure, shield flaring blue to deflect a hurled ice shard the size of his fist. It shattered on impact, shrapnel grazing his pauldron with fiery kisses. The swarm thickened—chittering scuttlers skittering across the ice, their crystalline legs etching furrows that wept oily corruption. One latched onto his calf, mandibles grinding against armor plating. He stomped, feeling the crunch underfoot, then blasted it point-blank. Plasma bloomed, charring its form to slag that bubbled and popped, releasing a stench like scorched circuitry mixed with decay. Lirael burst from a snowdrift thirty paces off, wind tether whipping behind her like a comet's tail. Her cloak shredded at the edges, face smeared with frost and

blood from a gash above her eye. “Portals are stabilizing—worst first!” She barked the order, no preamble, her stance wide as she summoned a tempest. Bolts forked from her palms, slamming into a cluster of invaders. Electricity arced, fusing chitin to ice in explosive welds; bodies convulsed, limbs locking rigid before shattering like glass under hammer blows. Kael and the holdouts emerged from a nearby overhang, rifles barking in staccato bursts. One survivor clutched a seared arm, teeth gritted, but he fired true—rounds punching through a scuttler’s underbelly, spilling loops of glowing innards that writhed on the ground. “Beacon’s down, but this rift’s feeding on the engine’s echo!” Kael shouted, voice gravelly over the din. His squad laid suppressive fire, tracers streaking like fireflies in the blizzard, buying space amid the chaos. The colossal horror roared again, a thunderclap that vibrated through Terry’s ribs. Its form loomed larger now, fully birthed from the ice—a hulking leviathan of fused glacier and blight, tendrils of frozen pseudopods whipping the air. One claw, immense and veined with pulsing black crystal, gouged the shelf, sending tremors that buckled the ground. Fissures spiderwebbed outward, swallowing a holdout’s footing; he plummeted with a curse, rifle vanishing into the dark. “Target the joints—cripple mobility!” Terry commanded, arrogance edging his tone as he dashed forward, plasma grid deploying from his gauntlet. It hummed, a lattice of azure energy slicing toward the claw’s base. The beam hit, melting through armored hide in a hiss of vaporizing flesh. Ichor jetted, freezing mid-air into brittle spikes that rained down, piercing snow with crystalline tinkles. Elara flanked left, roots erupting from her gloves to burrow into the ice. They coiled around the claw’s ankle, thorns digging deep, squeezing until black veins ruptured in geysers of foul sludge. The smell hit like a punch—ozone laced with caramelized rot, clinging to the throat. “It’s adapting—vines won’t hold forever!” Her words carried accusation, eyes flicking to Terry’s grid as if questioning its precision against the beast’s raw surge. A hallucinatory phantom materialized then, an ice wraith mimicking Lirael’s form, lunging with phantom lightning that solidified into real barbs. Lirael parried with her own gale, winds howling to shred the illusion into harmless flakes. But the distraction cost them; a Voidtouched Hound bounded over the crevasse, slamming into a holdout. Claws raked armor, tearing

rents that exposed flesh now bubbling with blight—skin twisting, fusing with metallic flecks in grotesque fusion. “Cover him!” Kael roared, pumping rounds into the hound’s flank. Bullets ricocheted off hardened hide, but one struck true, exploding its jaw in a wet spray. The holdout staggered, fingers clawing at the corruption spreading up his arm like ink in water. Elara was there in a blur, hurling a vial of elixir that shattered on his skin. Green foam bubbled, cauterizing the blight with sizzles, but his face twisted in agony— a physical vote against pushing deeper without medevac. The leviathan reared, its maw exhaling another freezing gale. Winds howled, pelting them with razor-sharp hail that clattered off shields and bit into exposed skin. Terry’s visor fogged, alarms blaring low power. Resources dwindled—plasma cells at half, Elara’s elixirs spent, Lirael’s tempests flickering from exhaustion. They retreated across a scalding fissure, steam rising in choking clouds that burned lungs and blurred vision. “Scanners picking up a secondary pulse—buried beacon variant!” Terry yelled, interfacing his gauntlet with a frost-crusted outcrop. Data streamed: a syndicate amplifier, humming beneath the ice, channeling the engine’s corruption to widen rifts across realms. It linked straight to his father’s schematics—weaponized veins primed to bleed into Earth. Lirael unleashed a lightning torrent, forking into the snow to expose the device: a squat obelisk of blackened crystal, runes throbbing with inner light. “Overload it—fuse everything!” Her impulse shone through clenched fists, stormweave coiling around her arms like living serpents. Invaders closed in, a tide of chitin and crystal. Scuttlers skittered up the leviathan’s hide, merging into its form, amplifying its mass. One swarmfly cluster—iridescent flecks buzzing from a void-spill—coalesced into a humanoid shape, compound eyes gleaming as it dive-bombed Elara. She whipped thorns to disperse it, flecks scattering like shrapnel, but one burrowed toward her neck. Terry’s shield expanded, kinetic pulse slamming the swarm into the ice with bone-jarring force. They converged on the beacon. Terry’s plasma flooded its core, circuits igniting in chain reactions that propagated fractures. Elara’s roots pierced its base, vines swelling to crack the casing. Lirael’s tempests danced along the runes, arcs melting conduits in bursts of superheated steam. The obelisk bucked, feedback lancing back to the leviathan. Its colossal frame shuddered, claws slamming

down in fury— one raking Kael's position, hurling him into a drift with a grunt. Portals yawned wider, gravitational eddies tugging at gear and limbs. A holdout vanished into one, scream cut short. Elara anchored with a root grapple, line taut to Terry, but suction tore her free. She tumbled toward the maw, whip lashing futilely. "Grab on!" Lirael extended her wind tether, coiling around Elara's waist. Sparks flew as energies clashed, but the rift pulled harder. The leviathan's roar split the air, its full form awakening—titanic bulk eclipsing the storm, voids spilling endless swarms. Chitinous horrors poured forth, maws gaping, claws scraping ice in a symphony of shrieks. Terry fired his harpoon toward a stable ledge, line whipping through the gale. It embedded with a thunk, yanking him upward as the first wave crashed below, jaws gnashing at empty snow. But the ice groaned beneath the horde, a fresh fissure erupting with a spray of pressurized blight. Something immense stirred within, its silhouette blotting the light.

Chapter 13: Glacial Exile: Fractured Bonds

The wind howled through the jagged fissures of Frostveil's glaciers, carrying flecks of ice that stung like needles against exposed skin. Terry Prince gripped his Nexus Gauntlet tighter, its holographic grid flickering in the dim aurora light as he scanned the ledge ahead. The massive shelf of blue-veined ice groaned under their weight, cracking in spiderweb patterns that spread like fractures in glass. Behind them, the pursuing leviathan's roar echoed—a guttural bellow that vibrated the frozen ground, sending tremors up their legs. Its colossal form, a hulking mass of frost-crusted chitin and pulsing black veins, lumbered closer, its segmented limbs pulverizing boulders into powder. "Beacon's thirty meters north," Terry barked, his voice cutting through the gale. He jabbed a finger toward a protruding spire of obsidian, half-buried in the snow, its surface etched with glowing runes that hummed with stolen energy. "We overload it, and that thing shatters. Elara, vines on the base. Lirael, lightning to the core. Kael, your squad covers the flanks—stormweaves on those crawlers spawning from its underbelly." Elara Voss nodded, her breath fogging the air as she knelt and pressed her palms to the ice.

Thorny roots erupted from the ground with a wet crack, coiling around the beacon's pedestal like iron cables, splintering the frost and drawing oily black ichor from hidden cracks. The substance bubbled up, sizzling against the cold, releasing that acrid tang of ozone and charred syrup. Lirael Thorne crouched beside her, fingers splayed, summoning a crackling arc of electricity that leaped from her hands to the spire's tip. The air ionized, hairs standing on end as the bolt hammered home, runes flaring white-hot. Kael's squad—five weathered mages in tattered academy cloaks—fanned out, their rifles humming with infused storm energy. Bolts of azure lightning spat from barrels, lancing into the swarm of chitinous crawlers skittering from the leviathan's joints. The bugs exploded in sprays of frozen gore, carapaces shattering like eggshells, leaving steaming craters in the snow. Terry activated his gauntlet with a flick, projecting a lattice of superheated plasma that intertwined with the roots and storm. The beacon buckled, its core overloading in a chain reaction. A deafening crack split the air as the spire detonated, hurling shards of obsidian outward like shrapnel. The leviathan reared, its immense body convulsing. Black veins ruptured across its hide, spewing geysers of corrupting sludge that froze mid-air into jagged spikes. With a final, earth-shaking thrash, the beast fragmented—chunks of armored flesh slamming into the glacier, carving furrows deep enough to swallow a person whole. Steam rose from the impacts, mingling with the group's ragged breaths. But victory curdled fast. The overload ripped open destabilizing portals along the fissures, swirling vortexes of distorted space that sucked in snow and spat out swarms of invaders. Chitinous horrors poured forth—scuttlers the size of wolves, their legs clicking like shears, mandibles dripping with acidic frost. One lunged at Harlan, Kael's point man, its claws raking his thigh before a stormweave rifle blast pulped its head, spraying viscous fluid across the ice. "Separations!" Kael roared, firing into the horde. "Regroup at the basin—fall back!" Chaos erupted. A portal yawned beneath Elara, yanking her sideways into a swirl of biting winds. She twisted, firing an arrow laced with entangling barbs that pinned two scuttlers mid-leap, their bodies thrashing as roots burst from the shafts to crush them. Terry dove after her, his kinetic shield flaring—a dome of rippling energy that deflected a barrage of icy spines, but the force hurled him against

a ice wall, cracking ribs with a sharp pain that bloomed hot in his side. Lirael summoned a gale that hurled a cluster of invaders into a crevasse, their shells splintering on the drop, but a pseudopod from a fresh rift lashed out, coiling around her ankle. She slashed it with a bolt, the limb severing in a spray of ichor that burned like acid on her boot, melting leather to skin. Kael's squad scattered, two mages vanishing into separate portals with screams cut short by the void's pull. They reformed in a shallow basin, the glacier's edge dropping into a chasm where geothermal vents belched steam. Terry slumped against a boulder, gauntlet sparking as he recalibrated. Blood trickled from a gash on his forehead, freezing in crimson rivulets. Elara knelt nearby, binding a squad member's arm with herbal poultice that steamed on contact, her face etched with strain. Lirael paced, rubbing her scorched ankle, eyes flicking to Terry with a glare that could freeze mercury. "That weave was too aggressive," Lirael snapped, her voice low but edged like a blade. She gestured at the gauntlet, where residual plasma hummed. "You pushed the overload past safe thresholds. If we'd synced the storm first—" "Syncing takes time we didn't have," Terry shot back, wiping blood from his brow with a sleeve that came away sticky. His jaw tightened, a smirk tugging despite the pain—arrogance flickering in the set of his shoulders. "My father's schematics predicted the shatter point exactly. Traditional fury-storms? They'd have scattered the energy, left the beast crawling after us." Elara's hands stilled on the bandage, her fingers digging into the fabric until knuckles whitened. She rose, green eyes narrowing between them. "Your father's schematics? The ones that twisted rifts into weapons? We've seen the logs, Terry. Those 'innovations' birthed half these horrors." Her tone laced accusation with exhaustion, roots withdrawing from her palms with a soft snap, leaving dirt-streaked skin. "Reckless precision got us through the forge, but it's fraying us now. Lirael's right—your lances burn hot, but they don't bind the chaos." Lirael crossed her arms, the motion pulling at her wound, but she didn't flinch. "It's not just the weave. It's you chasing his ghost. Every overload risks pulling us all into the blight." Silence stretched, heavy as the steam clouds, her gaze boring into Terry like a storm front gathering. He met it, gauntlet clenching until servos whirred. "Ghost or not, his work's our edge. Without it, we're clawing ice with

sticks." Kael interrupted, hauling a salvaged beacon fragment from the snow. His squad—down to three, faces smeared with frostbite—clustered around as he interfaced a portable scanner. Static hissed, resolving into a holographic transmission: grainy footage of the armored leader in a veiled chamber, runes pulsing around a converging array. "Multiversal engine priming," a distorted voice announced. "Convergence in hours—Riftblight floods all realms." The squad exchanged grim nods, rifles slung low. "Leader's rallying for a big push," Kael muttered, pocketing the device. "Beacons like these are relays. We hit more, we buy time." Before Terry could respond, the ice shuddered. A rift tore open at the basin's center, exhaling a freezing gale laced with black motes. From the depths clawed an abyssal horror—a titanic thing of writhing tentacles armored in glacial plates, its maw a vortex of jagged fangs dripping corrosive slime. It surged upward, slamming a limb that pulverized the boulder Terry leaned on, sending shards flying like bullets. "Form up!" Terry yelled, gauntlet igniting with plasma lances that seared into the beast's flank, melting armor into slag that hissed and bubbled. Elara unleashed a barrage of vines, thorny whips lashing out to snare tentacles, yanking them taut until they snapped with wet pops, ichor freezing mid-spray into brittle spikes that shattered under bootfalls. Lirael channeled a tempest, winds howling as lightning forked from her hands, arcing across the horror's hide and exploding plates in showers of superheated steam. Kael's mages fired in unison, stormweaves carving glowing furrows that steamed and cracked the ice further. The beast thrashed, a tentacle sweeping low to crush one mage against the rim—bones crunching, body vanishing into the chasm with a final gurgle. Pain lanced through the group as the horror's slime splashed, burning flesh and melting gear. Terry's shield buckled under a direct hit, hurling him into snow that scorched his back. Elara staggered, a gash across her arm weeping blood that froze in beads. Lirael bellowed a curse, her storm faltering as exhaustion clawed at her. They converged on the rift's edge, Terry's plasma grid fusing with Elara's roots and Lirael's gales into a sealing weave. Energy surged, the portal contracting with a thunderclap, tentacles withdrawing in sprays of severed ends. The horror's roar faded into gurgles as the rift clamped shut, leaving a crater rimmed with molten edges and scattered chitin

fragments smoking in the cold. Panting, they slumped amid the wreckage—shell casings and root remnants crunching underfoot, the air thick with burnt ozone and the metallic bite of blood. Trust hung fragile, Elara's averted gaze and Lirael's clenched fists speaking louder than words. Kael's remaining squad scanned the horizon, where thawing wilds beckoned beyond the fractured shelf. Terry pushed to his feet first, gauntlet dimming as he eyed the distant steam plumes. "We move. Engine's ticking." He extended a hand to Elara, but she rose alone, brushing past toward the wilds' edge, the group trailing in uneasy silence as the glacier calved behind them with a resonant boom.

The uneven crust of the glacier shelf gave way beneath their boots with treacherous crunches, each step sending hairline fissures spiderwebbing outward like veins of cracked porcelain. Terry scanned the horizon, where plumes of steam twisted upward from geothermal fissures, marking the boundary between the frozen expanse and the thawing wilds—a tangled frontier of moss-choked crevices and steaming pools that promised cover but reeked of hidden perils. His gauntlet hummed faintly, reserves dipping low after the rift seal, forcing him to ration the next plasma discharge. Elara led the way, her shoulders rigid, bow slung across her back as she probed the snow with a makeshift staff carved from a fallen root. Lirael limped beside her, one hand pressed to a frostbitten cheek where the horror's slime had left a raw welt, her other gripping a storm-charged arrow nocked but unloosed. Kael's squad—down to four mages now, their cloaks tattered and rifles scarred—flanked the rear, eyes darting to the calving echoes behind them. A low vibration thrummed through the ice, not the distant rumble of collapse but something deliberate, like the grind of buried machinery. Terry halted, palm raised. To the left, a narrow ravine dipped into shadow, its walls glistening with meltwater that could hide ambushes or offer a defensible choke point. Rightward, the shelf flattened into open drifts, faster traversal but exposed to whatever pursued. The risk of the ravine was entrapment; the drifts invited pursuit. His goal: spot the syndicate beacons before they amplified another leviathan surge. "Ravine," he decided, voice clipped. "Choke their advance." Elara nodded curtly, veering left without comment, her boots sinking into slush that sucked at her ankles. Lirael muttered under her

breath, the wind around her fingers flickering erratically as she followed. The squad fell in, one mage—Joren, his face gaunt from blood loss—coughing wetly into his sleeve. The air grew thicker with the tang of sulfur, undercut by a sharper note: the acrid bite of overheating circuits mixed with damp rot. Deeper in the ravine, the walls loomed, veined with syndicate beacons—pulsing orbs of corrupted crystal embedded like malignant growths, their glow casting erratic shadows that danced like fleeing prey. Terry's scanner pinged, overlaying holographic readouts: three beacons, each feeding energy to a pursuing leviathan's remnants, the colossal form shattered but regenerating in fragments beneath the ice. Overload them, and the feedback could fracture the beast for good—but the surge might widen micro-rifts, spawning lesser threats. He weighed the options: target the nearest with a precise plasma lance, minimizing splash, or chain them with Elara's vines for a synchronized burst. The physical toll—his gauntlet overheating, scorching his wrist—held him back, but the leviathan's tremors grew insistent, shaking loose avalanches of powder snow. "Beacons at ten o'clock," Terry barked, pointing. "Elara, roots to link 'em. Lirael, cover the surge." He ignited his gauntlet, the hum escalating to a whine as plasma coalesced into a searing lance. Elara knelt, palms slamming into the frost; thorny tendrils erupted from the ground, coiling like iron cables around the first orb, thorns piercing its facets with brittle cracks. The vine extended, snaring the second and third, yanking them into a taut circuit. Lirael's hands crackled, summoning a gale that whipped snow into blinding flurries, masking their positions. Terry fired. The plasma lance struck the linked chain, energy arcing in a brilliant cascade. The beacons detonated in sequence—first a pop of shattering crystal, then a chain reaction that hurled geysers of steam and molten slag skyward. The ice buckled, a deafening groan echoing as the leviathan's buried bulk convulsed, segments of its frost-veined hide erupting in fissures that spewed chitinous debris. But the overload backlashed: micro-rifts tore open along the ravine floor, shimmering tears belching swarms of invaders. Smaller horrors skittered forth—nightmarish fusions of chitin exoskeletons and rusted iron plating, their legs clicking with wet grinding noises as joints meshed unnaturally. Mandibles gnashed, spraying acidic spittle that sizzled on the snow, carving pits that steamed. "Flank left!" Terry roared,

pivoting as a swarm surged toward Joren. His kinetic shield flared, absorbing a leaping horror's charge; the impact reverberated up his arm, chitin cracking against the energy barrier with a sound like splintering glass. Joren fired his rifle, bolts punching through a cluster—bodies bursting in sprays of ichor and twisted metal shards that clattered like hail. But the rift widened behind him, a destabilizing portal yawning with a suction that tugged at cloaks and loose snow. Elara whipped vines to haul Joren back, thorns embedding in his gear, but a larger invader—a hulking brute with iron-fused claws—barreled through, slamming into the mage. Joren's scream cut short as claws rended fabric and flesh, blood blooming dark against the white before the portal yanked him in, vanishing with a wet slurp. Panic rippled through the group. Lirael unleashed a torrent of lightning, forks slamming into the swarm; horrors convulsed, exoskeletons fracturing in explosive pops, iron plates melting into glowing puddles that fused with the ice. Yet more poured from the rifts, their grinding scuttles drowning out the wind. Elara's vines lashed out, ensnaring clusters and crushing them with compressive snaps, sap mingling with oily black ichor that burned her palms. Terry's plasma lances carved furrows through the horde, superheated blasts vaporizing limbs and leaving craters rimmed with charred husks, the ozone stench cloying his throat. A portal's pull intensified near Kael, sucking at the squad leader's boots. "Transmission incoming!" one mage yelled, wrestling a handheld rift anchor from a fallen horror—the syndicate device, its core throbbing as it interfaced with a beacon fragment. Holographic static flickered: the armored leader's voice, distorted but clear, outlining a multiversal convergence at Frostveil's core, corruption veins aligning to ignite the engine. Revelations hit like shrapnel—ties to Terry's father's experiments, twisted into this weaponized blight. But the swarms pressed, forcing splits. A rift gaped beneath Elara, tendrils of distortion coiling around her legs. She twisted free, firing an arrow that embedded in a scuttler's eye, the creature's death screech echoing as it toppled into the void. Lirael grabbed her arm, hauling her up, but their eyes locked in fury. "Your weaves are suicide!" Lirael spat, breath fogging between them, fingers digging into Elara's shoulder hard enough to bruise. "Pushing like your damned father—reckless, blind to the cost!" Elara wrenched away, a vine coiling protectively around her waist,

eyes flashing. “And your storms lash out without thought! If we’d held back, Joren—” Terry interjected, shield deflecting a claw swipe that sparked against the energy field, numbing his fingers. “Not now!” But the words hung, resentments surfacing like fissures—Elara’s quiet aversion to Terry’s unyielding drive, echoing losses from his lineage’s hubris; Lirael’s impulsive gales, born of her own orphaned rage, clashing against Elara’s measured roots. The argument fractured their formation, portals exploiting the gap. One yanked Kael’s remaining mages apart, their shouts lost in the grind of chitin as two vanished into swirling voids. Terry lunged for Lirael as a swarm crested the rift edge, his plasma grid deploying in a sweeping arc that bisected a dozen horrors, legs twitching in severed piles amid the reek of burnt shell. Elara bound a brute’s limbs, thorns puncturing rusted joints until it imploded with a hydraulic hiss, but exhaustion bowed her stance, blood from earlier gashes thawing into rivulets down her arm. Lirael’s tempest faltered, winds dying to gusts that merely scattered debris, her hands trembling from overchanneling. From the ravine’s end, an abyssal horror breached the ice—a titanic maw of frozen fangs and pulsating veins, exhaling a gale that flash-froze exposed skin and gear. It lunged, colossal bulk shattering the shelf, sending the group tumbling toward a chasm. Terry rolled, gauntlet scraping ice as he considered: plasma to the maw’s core, risking overload, or vines to anchor and pull. The risk—backlash melting the shelf entirely—chilled him, but the goal burned clear: buy time for reunion. “Converge on the jaw!” he bellowed. Elara and Lirael, separated by swirling snow, exchanged a terse nod—resentment banked for survival. Vines erupted, lashing the horror’s underbelly, anchoring to outcrops with root-deep grips. Lirael’s lightning reignited, arcing into the maw; the beast recoiled, fangs shattering in crystalline bursts, steam billowing from charred flesh. Terry’s lance pierced the vein cluster, plasma erupting inward in a geyser of superheated ichor that boiled the air, the smell of seared meat overwhelming. Kael, reuniting from a side crevice, directed rifle fire into the wounds, bolts widening craters that wept black sludge. The horror thrashed, a final swipe claiming one mage—body crushed against the wall, bones pulverizing with a muffled crack, form tumbling into the depths. But the combined assault forced it back, the rift it emerged from contracting under the onslaught.

Energy fused: plasma lattices weaving with thorny bindings and electric surges, clamping the tear with a resonant snap. The maw withdrew, ice sealing over in a hiss of condensing steam, leaving a jagged scar and scattered remnants crunching underfoot. Panting, the survivors staggered together—Kael's squad halved, Elara's arm bound hastily with vine strips, Lirael's face ashen. Trust frayed like the rift's edges, glares unspoken but heavy. Supplies dwindled: ammo clips near empty, elixirs spent. The transmission's warning loomed, the leader's convergence drawing near. Terry shouldered the rift anchor, its core still warm, and pointed toward the steaming wilds, where mist-shrouded spires hinted at exile's perils. Elara stepped forward first, staff probing the mist, the group following into the haze as a distant tremor shook loose more snow from above.

The mist clung like a shroud, thickening as the group trudged into Frostveil's thawing wilds. Terry's boots ground over brittle ice laced with black conduits, each step sending faint tremors up his legs. Elara led, her bracers buzzing softly, uncoiling slender vines that probed ahead like questing fingers, slick with that oily residue. Lirael flanked her, staff gripped knuckles blanching, breath fogging in erratic bursts. Kael brought up the rear with his remaining squad—three grim faces, rifles slung low, one limping from a gash that oozed through hasty bandages. A low rumble echoed from behind, not the distant shudder but something nearer, grinding like stone on bone. Terry peered rearward, gauntlet whirring as it probed. "Leviathans' projections," he muttered. "Those shards we splintered—they're reforming." Elara's vines retracted with a snap, her shoulders rigid. She cast Terry a sideways look, lips compressing. "Your overloads are stirring the whole glacier. We could've anchored them quieter." Before Terry could retort, the ground lurched. Geothermal fissures gaped wide, belching sulfurous plumes that blistered the air and melted nearby snow into steaming slush. From the haze, syndicate beacons pulsed—tall obelisks of twisted metal and crystal, laced with the same oily taint, buzzing with corrupted energy. One loomed ahead, its base crawling with crystalline scuttlers that chittered like shattering glass. Kael bellowed a command, his squad spreading out. "Flank it! Rifles on the base—crack those supports." Bolts pierced out, boring craters into the obelisk's

footing. Chunks of ice and metal rained down, one slamming into a squad member's shoulder with a thud that spun him sideways, arm dangling limp as he gasped, clutching the joint where bone ground audibly. Terry raised his gauntlet, runes stuttering to life. "I'll fry the core. Plasma surge—direct feed." Energy coiled in his palm, a contained storm of heat that warped the mist around it. Lirael stepped forward, wind whipping her hair into a frenzy. "Wait—channel it through my tempest first. Your raw blasts will just scatter the shards wider." Her eyes narrowed at him, a flicker of old arguments surfacing. Elara uncoiled thicker vines from her bracers, lashing them toward the beacon. "Both of you, focus. Bind it, then hit." The tendrils wrapped the obelisk's midsection, thorns digging in with wet punctures, black ichor oozing from the wounds. But the structure thrummed louder, repelling the growth with jolts that made Elara's arms jerk, her knees buckling as feedback rippled up her limbs. Terry ignored the debate, thrusting his hand forward. A lance of superheated plasma erupted, slamming into the beacon's apex. The impact bloomed outward in a shockwave, hurling snow and debris in a blinding arc. The obelisk groaned, circuits fracturing with pops of ozone-scented sparks, its core overloading in a cascade of molten conduits. The reek of burnt-sugar stench intensified, mingling with the sulfur. But the backlash crashed hard. The beacon splintered, shards exploding like shrapnel. One grazed Lirael's thigh, embedding deep enough to tear fabric and flesh in a spray that made her stagger, leg buckling as she pressed a hand to the wound, blood seeping hot between fingers. Another piece clipped Kael's helmet, the force whipping his head back and splitting the visor with a crack that left his vision starred, ears ringing from the concussive boom. Worse followed. The overload ripped open destabilizing portals—jagged tears in the air, exhaling frigid winds laced with chitinous swarms. Invaders poured through: scuttlers the size of hounds, their shells clicking as they scurried over the ice, mandibles dripping acidic foam. One clamped onto a squad member's boot, jaws clamping with a crunch that splintered bone; he howled, firing wildly until the creature's body burst in a spray of ichor, but his foot twisted unnaturally, forcing him to crawl. "Scatter!" Terry roared, kinetic shield flaring around him—a shimmering barrier that deflected a leaping scuttler, sending it tumbling with a skid that cracked

its carapace. The group fragmented in the chaos. Portals gaped wider, sucking at edges of the glacier. Elara dove behind an ice ridge, vines whipping to snare a swarm mid-leap, but a gust from one tear yanked Lirael sideways, her staff slipping from numb fingers as she clawed at the snow. Terry lunged after her, gauntlet firing a plasma grid that seared three scuttlers into charred husks, their legs fusing in the heat. “Lirael—grab on!” His free hand clamped her wrist, muscles straining as the portal’s pull dragged them both toward the void. She twisted, summoning a gale that propelled them back, but the effort left her coughing, ribs heaving from the strain, each breath a sharp stab. Kael’s voice sliced through the clamor, his squad huddled at a beacon fragment. “Transmission—it’s live!” One rifleman linked a salvaged probe, holographic static stuttering to life. The armored leader’s voice crackled, distorted: “... convergence at the nexus heart. Engine primed—rift corruption floods all realms. Father’s weave completes the chain.” The feed cut as scuttlers overran the spot, but the words hung, tying back to Terry’s lineage like a noose. Elara emerged from her cover, bracers spent, vines wilting. She hauled a squad member to his feet, but her gaze locked on Terry as he helped Lirael up. “That weave of yours—it’s unraveling us. Like his father, blind to the cost.” Lirael’s laugh was bitter, short, as she retrieved her staff with a wince, thigh wound pulsing. She jabbed a finger toward Terry’s gauntlet. “She’s right. You push plasma like it’s invincible, but it feeds the taint. Your old man’s logs showed the same—experiments that cracked worlds. We need balance, not your ego-fueled blasts.” Terry’s jaw clenched, a smirk twitching despite the swarm’s press. He fired another bolt, vaporizing a scuttler that lunged at Elara, the projectile’s recoil jarring his shoulder. “Balance got us chased into this freezer. My way overloads the beacons—ends the pursuit.” But his eyes flicked to the data slate at his belt, father’s shadow looming in the glow. The argument fractured further as leviathan remnants stirred. From fractured ice, towering forms heaved—hulking silhouettes of frost-veined flesh and crystal, pursuing the overload’s projection. One brute barreled, its bulk splintering the ground, geothermal geysers erupting in its wake and blistering a path that scorched exposed skin. Kael directed fire, bolts pockmarking the brute’s hide, but it barreled on, a sweeping limb catching a squad member square in the chest. The impact lifted him off his

feet, ribs splintering with audible snaps as he flew into a fissure, vanishing in a plume of steam with a final, gurgling cry. The loss hit like a gut punch; Kael's face hardened, rifle crackling faster. Portals spat more invaders, forcing splits. Terry and Kael veered left into a narrowing crevice, scuttlers nipping at heels. Elara and Lirael bolted right, toward a steaming basin where mist veiled deeper wilds. "Regroup at the spires!" Terry yelled, voice swallowed by the roar. Alone with Kael, Terry overloaded a lesser beacon shard, plasma fusing with rifle bursts to splinter a pursuing tendril. The explosion deafened them momentarily, a shrill whir piercing ears as shards embedded in the ice. Kael winced, shaking his head, but pressed on, uncovering another transmission fragment: coordinates for the leader's convergence, a nexus point in the wilds' heart. Across the divide, Elara and Lirael fought back-to-back. Vines lashed from Elara's bracers, coiling around scuttlers and crushing shells with pops of viscous fluid. Lirael's tempest hurled lightning torrents, arcing chains that electrocuted clusters, the shocks rippling through chitin and leaving smoking husks. But resentment simmered. Elara glanced at Lirael mid-strike, her vine-spear impaling a crawler. "Terry's weaves—they're unraveling us. Like his father, blind to the cost." Lirael nodded sharply, wind shoving back a wave, but her grip on the staff faltered, thigh screaming. "Tell him that when we link up. Or we'll lose more than trust." The leviathans closed in, their bellows shaking loose avalanches. A new abyssal horror breached from a widening wound in the basin's center—immense jaws of glacial bone, exhaling gales that frosted lungs and numbed limbs. It lunged, colossal form eclipsing the mist, fangs grinding as it snapped at Elara. She rolled aside, the maw's edge splintering ice and sending her sprawling, elbow slamming into a geothermal vent that blistered her skin raw. Lirael unleashed a shockwave of brute force wind, slamming the horror's flank and cracking armored plates, but the beast recoiled only to swipe, its tail whipping her mid-air. The blow connected with her side, hurling her against an outcrop; she hit with a thud that expelled air from her lungs, vision blurring as she slid down, tasting copper. Shouts echoed—Terry and Kael bursting from the crevice, gauntlets and rifles blazing. Plasma bolts pierced the horror's underbelly, boiling veins in bursts of steam. Vines from Elara bound a limb, thorns grinding into joints. Lightning surged from Lirael, despite

her daze, forking into the maw and charring innards. Kael's squad—down to two—pummeled wounds with volleys, widening gashes that oozed frozen sludge. The horror thrashed, a final convulsion toppling a spire that crushed one last squad member under tons of ice, his scream cut short by the rumble. Energy converged: Terry's lattices clamping with Elara's bindings and Liraels surges, forcing the wound to contract in a grinding seal, steam hissing as it fused shut. Panting, they staggered together amid the wreckage. Trust hung by threads—glares exchanged, wounds throbbing. Elara bound Liraels side with vine strips, fingers steady but eyes averted from Terry. He pocketed the transmission coords, pointing toward the mist-veiled spires. Kael shouldered his empty rifle, the group limping forward as another shudder cracked the horizon, exile's wilds beckoning with veiled threats.

Ice groaned underfoot, fissures spiderwebbing outward like veins in a dying beast. Terry led the limp, his nexus-weave gauntlets flickering with residual charge, casting erratic blue glows on the frost-slick path. The mist-veiled spires loomed closer, jagged teeth against a bruised sky, but the horizon's crack echoed like a predator's growl, sending fresh tremors through the glacier. Elara trailed at his flank, her steps measured despite the blister on her elbow weeping clear fluid. She flexed her fingers, summoning a coil of thorny vines that slithered over a nearby crevasse, bridging it with a creak of straining fibers. Liraels brought up the rear, staff planted like an anchor with each hobble, her bandaged side pulling taut. Kael, rifle slung empty over his shoulder, supported the last of his squad—a wiry scout named Voss, whose leg dragged a furrow in the snow, breath rasping through frostbitten lips. "Beacons ahead," Terry muttered, eyes locked on a pulsing glow amid the spires. He jabbed a gauntlet forward, plasma humming to life. "We overload them. Shatter whatever's chasing." Kael grunted, scanning the haze with a sweep of his arm, pistol drawn. "Smart play. But those leviathans won't shatter easy. Hit the cores—make it count." His gesture toward the glow was precise, a soldier's economy, betraying no doubt in the plan's edge. They crested a ridge, the spires resolving into obelisks of twisted ice and metal, syndicate beacons throbbing at their bases. Chitinous skittering echoed from behind—remnants

of the shattered horror, crawlers reforming in the swarms. Terry charged the nearest beacon, circuits whirring as he interfaced, energy surging into its conduits. The obelisk bucked, runes flaring crimson before exploding in a geyser of superheated steam that melted surrounding ice into sloshing pools. Leviathans bellowed in response, colossal forms lumbering from the mist, their frost-veined hides cracking with each step. One smashed a flank into the ridge, sending boulders tumbling. Elara whipped vines skyward, lashing a tendril around a falling slab and yanking it aside, the impact jarring her shoulders. "Converge fire!" she barked, her vine-bridge snapping taut to haul Voss across a widening gap. Lirael channeled a gale, wind howling to buffet a leviathan's advance, shards of ice pelting its eyes like hail. But the overload rippled outward—portals yawned in the air, destabilizing voids sucking at the air with vacuum pulls. One snagged Voss mid-stride; he clawed at the edge, boots scraping futilely before the rift yanked him in, his shout swallowed by a thunderclap closure. Kael lunged, fingers grazing empty air. He froze, fist clenching around his pistol's grip until the metal creaked. No words—just a sharp pivot back to the fight, eyes narrowing on the next beacon. "Keep moving!" Terry roared, plasma lancing into another obelisk. The blast hollowed its core, shrapnel spraying like frozen knives, one grazing Lirael's cheek and drawing a thin red line. She wiped it with her sleeve, jaw set, and hurled lightning that forked into the structure, charring circuits in crackling bursts. The second leviathan charged, immense bulk plowing through the mist. Elara's vines snared its forelimb, thorns burrowing deep enough to draw sluggish ichor that froze mid-drip. Terry's kinetic shield flared, absorbing a swipe that cratered the snow beside him, sending up a plume that blinded for a heartbeat. Lirael struck next, her tempest coiling around the beast's maw, winds grinding fangs to powder in a whirlwind of debris. But the portals multiplied. A chitinous swarm erupted from one—invaders with segmented bodies, mandibles clicking as they swarmed the ridge. They latched onto the third leviathan, burrowing into cracks from the overload, accelerating its shatter. Chunks of hide sloughed off in avalanches, burying crawlers and forcing the group to scatter. Elara dodged a tumbling mass, rolling into a crouch, but a portal's edge clipped her, hurling her toward a crevasse. Lirael grabbed her wrist, muscles straining

as wind propped them both against the suction. “Pull—now!” Lirael’s free hand clenched, knuckles white, her voice clipped, revealing the strain of the tether without plea. Terry blasted a swarm cluster, plasma boiling their exoskeleons into molten husks that sizzled on the ice. Kael fired precise shots, each bullet punching through chitin and splintering joints, bodies piling in steaming heaps. Yet the separations bit deep—a crawler wave isolated Lirael, forcing her to carve a path with shockwaves that pulverized foes into powdery remains, leaving her isolated on a fracturing spur. “Terry’s overloads— they’re birthing more rifts!” Elara called across the gap, vines extending to bridge toward Lirael, her tone edged with strategy’s flaw, not accusation. She yanked the bridge taut, hauling Lirael back as the spur calved into the void. Lirael landed hard, staff skidding, and shot Elara a glance—eyes flicking to Terry’s gauntlets, then away. “Reckless vectors. Like his father’s logs—push too far, and the weave snaps back.” Her words landed flat, a tactical critique laced with the weight of unearthed archives, her fingers tightening on the staff as if to steady more than balance. Terry whirled, gauntlet humming. “They work. We’re shattering them—look!” He pointed to the crumbling leviathan, its form fracturing into harmless bergs that plunged into a fissure. But Elara’s brow furrowed, a subtle shake of her head as she bound a fresh crawler with roots that crushed its shell in a wet snap. Kael, meanwhile, knelt by a felled beacon, prying open its panel with his knife. Sparks flew as he extracted a data crystal, interfacing it with a wrist device. Holographic static flickered to life—coordinates, schematics, a voice droning: “...convergence at the Thawheart. Armored directive: align engines for multiversal breach. Father’s protocols integrated—” He snapped it off, pocketing the crystal with a terse nod to Terry. “Leader’s rallying. Bigger push incoming. We hit the wilds, regroup there.” His gesture swept toward the thawing horizon, where steam rose from cracks, betraying no grief for Voss, only the press of next moves. The group pushed on, supplies thinning—rations half-gnawed, elixirs spent on burns and gashes. Injuries mounted: Elara’s elbow throbbed under a hasty poultice, Lirael’s side wept through bandages, Terry’s gauntlets sparked from overuse. Portals flickered erratically, spitting minor horrors—rime-scuttlers that skittered on bladed legs, slicing furrows in the ice before plasma volleys melted

them into slag. Deeper in, the glaciers thinned to a labyrinth of steaming vents and precarious ledges. A final beacon cluster pulsed ahead, leviathan remnants—now hulking torsos—barreling through. Terry overloaded the array, energy feedback scorching his palms, the explosion ripping portals wide. Swarms boiled out: chitinous tides that engulfed Kael's position. He fired until his pistol clicked empty, then bashed a crawler's skull with the butt, exoskeleton cracking like eggshell. But the tide overwhelmed—one latched to his calf, mandibles sinking in. He stomped it free, ichor spraying, but another wave dragged him down, bodies piling in a writhing mass. "Kael!" Lirael's gale scattered a dozen, winds flaying limbs in bloody arcs, but too late. Elara's vines plunged into the heap, yanking corpses aside, revealing Kael's form—chest heaving, then stilling as a final scuttler pierced his throat. Blood pooled, freezing in crimson fractals. She recoiled, hand pressing to her mouth, eyes widening in a flash of raw strategy's toll—lives bartered for ground. Lirael staggered to a halt, staff dropping an inch, her glance at Terry sharp as a blade's edge. "This exile—it's on your weaves. Father's shadow pulling us under." Terry's jaw clenched, a smirk twitching despite the sting—arrogance in the set of his shoulders. "It gets us out. Seals the rifts." He turned, gauntlet raised toward the wilds, but Elara's fingers dug into his arm, halting him, her grip a silent veto on the path ahead. The group fractured further in silence, limping into the thawing expanse where steam curled like specters. Trust eroded like the ice at their feet—glares unspoken, wounds festering. Distant rumbles built, the convergence's harbinger. A low grind echoed from the mist, not thunder, but stone shifting under impossible weight.

Chapter 14: Shattered Bonds in the Thawing Veil

Terry trudged through the ankle-deep slush of Frostveil's thawing wilds, his boots crunching against brittle ice that gave way to sucking mud beneath. Steam hissed from fissures in the ground, carrying the acrid tang of sulfur that mingled with the ever-present ozone and burnt-sugar stench of corruption. The mist-veiled spires loomed ahead like jagged teeth piercing the

haze, their silhouettes distorted by swirling vapors. Elara flanked him on the left, her bow slung across her back, fingers twitching toward the pouch of herbal poultices at her belt. Lirael brought up the rear with the last three academy holdouts—scarred survivors named Mira, Jax, and Thorne—each gripping rifles scarred by frost and ichor. Their breaths fogged the air, ragged from the ceaseless push. A low rumble vibrated through the earth, and Terry halted, gaze probing the fractured terrain. To the right, a shelf of ice groaned, calving chunks the size of boulders that plummeted into a steaming crevasse. Fleeing that way risked burial under the slide, but pressing straight ahead meant navigating the vents that belched scalding geysers. His pressing goal: reach the spires' base before the next surge trapped them. He weighed the plasma emitter in his hand—its buzz a steady vibration against his palm—against the narrow path. Peril the vents; the emitter could vaporize a geyser mid-eruption if timed right. "Veer left," he muttered, pointing to a ridge of compacted snow. "Higher ground dodges the worst steam." Elara nodded, but her jaw clenched, green gaze flicking to the data slate clutched in his other fist. Lirael spat a curse, her cloak whipping in a gale she conjured to clear the fog. "Higher ground? That's just delaying the inevitable. Your father's logs are burning a hole in that thing—spit it out before we all melt." The group scrambled up the ridge, boots slipping on refreezing melt. Jax lagged, his limp worsening from a prior gash, and Mira hauled him by the arm, rifle slung over her shoulder. As they crested the rise, a chittering horde erupted from a thawing puddle—corruption scuttlers, their crystalline carapaces glinting like shattered glass, legs clattering in a frenzy. The lead one lunged at Thorne, mandibles clicking with wet snaps, leaving oily trails that sizzled on the snow. Terry pivoted, emitter charging with a whir. Tactics flashed: wide plasma arc to sweep the horde, or focused bolt to pierce through the densest cluster? The arc might overheat the ridge, cracking it further; the bolt conserved power but left flanks exposed. He chose the bolt, thrusting the barrel forward. A bolt of superheated plasma streaked out, vaporizing the lead scuttler in a burst of steam and crackling shards. The smell of scorched chitin filled the air, sharp and metallic. Elara unslung her bow, nocking an arrow tipped with thorny vine extract. She loosed it into the horde's heart, the

projectile burrowing deep before roots erupted, ensnaring three more in twisting coils that snapped their legs with fibrous pops. Lirael raised her arms, channeling a gale that hurled a dozen scuttlers into a vent; they plummeted with shrieks, boiled alive in the superheated spray. The holdouts fired in staccato bursts, bullets punching craters into crystalline hides, ichor spraying in foul arcs. But the scuttlers reformed from the edges, shards knitting back with oily slurps, conduits of corruption pulsing beneath. One latched onto Jax's leg, its legs burrowing like needles, fusing jagged crystals to his boot. He bellowed, stomping to dislodge it, but the corruption spread, twisting the leather into spiky protrusions. Mira yanked him back, her free hand clamping a tourniquet above the knee. "Forge ahead!" Terry bellowed, emitter still smoking. They crested another swell, the spires now tantalizingly close, but a deeper tremor shook the ground. From a reforming abomination shard—a hulking remnant of the leviathan, its frost-plated limb regenerating with grotesque cracks—emerged fresh scuttlers, burrowing out like maggots from meat. Elara's shoulders stiffened as she reloaded, her fingers lingering on the slate Terry had shared earlier. "That beacon log we intercepted—it's not just syndicate ramblings. Your father didn't just research Nexus-weaving. He engineered the corruption's spread, Terry. Weaponized it for 'stability.' How long have you known?" Terry's grip tightened on the emitter, knuckles blanching. He glanced at the slate's flickering hologram, suppressed fragments stirring—flashes of lab corridors, his father's voice murmuring about "controlled mutations." Deny it? Press on and ignore? The physical pull of the spires demanded focus, but the accusation hung like frostbite. "He was trying to fix the Sundering's mess. Not cause more." Lirael's laugh was bitter, wind curling around her fists like serpents ready to strike. She shoved past him, boots splashing through a melt pool that bubbled with corruption. "Fix it? Those logs show he seeded breaches in test realms. Suppressed memories or not, you're carrying his torch. Every plasma blast you fire echoes his hubris." The holdouts exchanged uneasy glances, Mira's rifle dipping slightly as she supported Jax. Thorne muttered under his breath, eyes darting to Terry as if weighing loyalties. A surge from a geothermal vent erupted to their right, hurling superheated mist that singed Elara's cloak. She dodged left,

vines sprouting from her palms to anchor her footing, but the steam carried scuttler spores—tiny, buzzing flecks that latched onto exposed skin. Terry swatted at his neck, feeling the sting like acid, the corruption's burnt-sugar stench intensifying. They reached the spires' threshold, a ring of towering ice formations etched with glowing runes, the air buzzing with charged particles, static prickling his skin. But the abomination shard lumbered closer, its regenerating bulk shedding crystalline flakes that clattered as new scuttlers. Worse, the air shimmered, a delirious guardian manifesting from the mist—a spectral projection of a Sundering warrior, its form solidifying into armored plates fused with writhing conduits, axe raised in a crackling swing. Terry's thoughts whirled: flank right around the spire base for cover, or charge the center with a kinetic shield to absorb the first blow? The shield would drain his reserves, leaving him vulnerable to scuttlers; flanking exposed the group to the shard's reach. Goal: Disrupt the guardian's manifestation before it fully coalesced. "Shield up—center push!" He activated the emitter's field, a shimmering barrier snapping into place around the group, buzzing with repelling force. The guardian's axe slammed down, the impact jarring Terry's arms as the shield buckled, sparks flying like struck flint. The screech of metal on energy field pierced the ears, ground quaking under the blow. Elara loosed vines that lashed the warrior's legs, thorns piercing plate and drawing black ichor that steamed on contact. Lirael conjured a torrent of lightning, bolts arcing from her fingertips to chain across the guardian's form, shattering segments of armor in explosive bursts that showered the snow with molten fragments. Mira and Thorne fired from the shield's edge, rounds ricocheting off the guardian's helm, while Jax, freed from his scuttler, hurled a grenade that cratered the abomination shard's base, halting its advance with a roar of splintering ice. But the confrontation fractured more than the foe. As the guardian staggered, its delirious haze deepened, projecting illusions that clawed into their minds—visions of betrayal. Elara saw Terry's father laughing amid lab experiments, vines recoiling from her grasp as if poisoned. She whirled on Terry, arrow half-nocked. "You hid this! We're dying for your family's sins!" Lirael's tempest faltered, lightning flickering as phantom images of her destroyed village overlaid the spires, blaming Terry's weaves. "We can't trust you—not with that blood!"

Her gust shoved him back a step, shield flickering. Terry reeled, emitter nearly slipping from sweat-slick hands. The guardian reformed, axe sweeping low. He dove right, shield collapsing in a shower of sparks, plasma bolt firing wild—grazing the warrior's side, carving a smoking gouge. The holdouts scattered: Mira dragged Jax behind a spire, Thorne firing blindly as illusions swarmed him like insects. Elara's vines lashed out, but not at the guardian—at Terry's feet, tripping him into the slush. "We go alone!" she snarled, turning toward a beckoning breach in the spire base, its edges pulsing with multiversal light. Lirael hesitated, eyes stormy, then followed, her wind propelling them forward. The guardian bellowed, charging the splintered group, but Terry rolled to his knees, emitter charging anew. The portal gaped wider, sucking air with a howling gale, as Thorne's scream cut short—swallowed by scuttler claws. Terry lunged toward the breach's edge, plasma buzzing, fingers outstretched to seize the vanishing forms.

Terry's boots scraped on the slick ice, the emitter's buzz vibrating up his arm like a live wire. The breach gaped before him, a jagged maw of churning azure and obsidian, exhaling gales that reeked of scorched ozone and thawing peat. Frostveil's sky hung low, bruised violet streaked with conduits of flickering aurora, while the ground lurched in rhythmic tremors, geothermal vents hissing steam that blistered his exposed skin. He thrust his free hand into the portal's pull, fingers brushing the hem of Elara's cloak just as it vanished into the maelstrom. The fabric tore free, whipping back to slap his face, cold and damp. "Wait!" His voice cracked against the thunder, but the breach clamped shut with a thunderclap, sealing the air in a pressure wave that hurled him backward. He crashed onto a ridge of splintered glacier, emitter clattering from his grip, the device sparking against blue-veined ice. Mira's shout reverberated from behind a toppled pinnacle—Mira and Jax, the last holdouts, scrambling over debris as scuttler swarms chittered closer, their obsidian shells glinting under the aurora's pallid glow. The air thickened with the acrid tang of melting rime and chitinous dust kicked up by clattering legs. Terry scrambled up, snatching the emitter. The guardian's bellow split the clamor, its axe cleaving a nearby shelf that calved into the ravine below, sending chunks

the size of hover-cars plummeting with wet snaps. He surveyed the threshold: the pinnacles loomed ahead, mist-shrouded towers of hoarfrost and basalt, their bases carved with glowing runes that throbbed like infected wounds. Leftward, a venting geyser belched superheated vapor, peril of burns high if he dashed that way. Right, the ice shelf teetered, one wrong step meaning a drop into the abyss. Straight on, scuttlers massed, a writhing tide of needle-limbed horrors, but it offered the clearest shot to the pinnacles' base where the portal had flickered. Pressing aim: Reopen the breach or force his way after them. He couldn't lose Elara and Lirael—not now, not to his own ghosts. Plasma coils whirred as he primed a bolt, thumb hovering over the discharge. Dodge the scuttlers, blast the guardian's flank to buy seconds, then jury-rig the emitter to spike the breach's residual energy. Peril: The guardian's projections could twist his aim, make him fire into allies. He bolted right, skirting the crumbling edge, boots thudding through brittle crust that gave way in puffs of powder. The guardian lumbered after, its frost-sheathed bulk cracking the ground, axe dragging furrows that steamed. Mira popped from cover, her rifle crackling slugs that pinged off the beast's pauldrons, drawing its gaze. Jax flanked her, lobbing a flare that burst in a blinding magnesium blaze, scorching a cluster of scuttlers into twitching husks, their shells popping like overripe pods. Terry reached the pinnacles' threshold, a concave alcove ringed by rune-carved pillars now weeping oily black rivulets. The air buzzed with charged particles, gravity feeling heavier here, as if the mist pressed down like a leaden fog. He knelt by the portal's faded scar, emitter probes extended, interfacing with the stone. Circuits lit, pulling schematics from the slate tucked in his belt—his father's fragmented logs, warnings of beacon overloads that could tear micro-breaches. A scuttler lunged from the mist, its heated points grazing his calf, searing fabric and drawing a hiss of pain. He kicked it aside, leg throbbing, and fired a plasma bolt that vaporized its core in a flash of azure vapor, the shell shattering into shards that skittered like hot coals. More poured in, reforming abomination shards clumping behind them—jagged remnants of the leviathan, knitting into hulking forms with pseudopod whips that lashed the air, cracking pillars and sending stone splinters flying. Mira and Jax joined him, backs to the alcove wall, chests heaving.

"They're gone," Mira gasped, reloading with trembling hands, her knuckles blanching on the magazine. Jax swiped ichor from his blade, eyes darting to the swarms. The guardian charged the threshold, projections blooming anew: phantom vines coiled around Terry's vision, mimicking Elara's, but these bore thorns dripping with corruption, wilting flora into blackened husks. He shook it off, focusing on the emitter's readout. The intercepted beacon log from the oasis scrolled: coordinates for a multiversal engine, blueprints laced with his father's signature—experiments in stabilizing corruption for "controlled evolution." Suppressed flashes hit him: lab corridors, his younger self watching vats bubble with oily essence, father's voice praising "the future's forge." He clenched the device, jaw clenched, as the log ended with a syndicate override: "Prince's heir carries the key—extract or eliminate." The guardian's axe slammed the alcove rim, shearing a pillar that toppled in a cascade of rime and rubble, burying two scuttlers under pulverized ice. Terry rolled left, avoiding the debris plume that stung his eyes with frozen grit. Elara's accusation echoed in his skull—"your family's sins"—fueled by these ghosts. He couldn't deny it anymore; the logs painted complicity, his own buried recollections confirming the weave that birthed this nightmare. "Cover me!" he bellowed at Mira and Jax, who nodded, firing into the swarm. Slugs tore through scuttler ranks, pulping innards that sprayed viscous fluid smelling of burnt-sugar stench and frost. Jax's blade cleaved a shard-pseudopod, the limb thrashing before crystallizing into harmless prisms. Terry's fingers flew over the emitter, overloading it to mimic the beacon's pulse—risking burnout, but the only way to punch a new breach. The guardian bellowed, projections sharpening: Lirael's face, twisted in rage, overlaid the beast's helm, her tempest turning against him in phantom gales that buffeted his stance. He staggered, wind clawing at his coat, but grounded his boots, emitter sparking as energy built. Plasma feedback heated his palm, blisters rising, but he held. Tactical pivot: If the breach opened wrong, it could suck them all in—better to anchor with a kinetic shield, limit the pull. He activated the shield, a shimmering dome snapping up around the alcove, buzzing against the onslaught. Scuttlers battered it, points scraping with shrieks like nails on alloy, while the guardian's axe rebounded in a spray of sparks, the impact jarring the ground into fissures that vented scalding

gas. The air grew stifling, mist condensing on their skin in icy beads. Emitter peaked, whirring shrill. The scar reignited, a vertical tear blooming with that same azure thunder, but narrower, unstable. Through it, glimpses: Elara and Lirael's silhouettes in a chamber of throbbing conduits, arguing, backs turned. Terry's heart hammered, but he shoved the emotion down—focus on the breach's edges, stabilize with a plasma thread to widen it without collapse. Mira fired past the shield's curve, her round cratering the guardian's knee, ice shards exploding outward in a brittle fan. Jax grunted, pseudopod whip coiling his ankle; he hacked it free, boot sole melting from the contact. "It's reforming faster!" he yelled, as abomination shards merged, birthing a secondary brute with spines that lashed the shield, etching glowing scars. Terry extended a plasma filament into the breach, the beam sizzling against multiversal friction, widening the gap with a scent of ionized air. The guardian lunged, axe shattering the shield in a cascade of discharging arcs that lit the mist like lightning. Terry dove through the enlarging portal, the pull yanking him into tumbling void—weightless for a heartbeat, gravity shifting like a drunkard's sway—emerging into the chamber beyond. He hit the floor rolling, emitter clutched tight, amid conduits that throbbed with oily black veins, the air heavy with the metallic tang of machinery and decay. Elara spun, arrow loosed—thudding into the wall inches from his head, splintering stone. Lirael's hands crackled with gathering static, her stance wide, eyes narrowed in the dim glow of rune-lamps. "You followed," Elara spat, nocking another shaft, her fingers steady but knuckles blanching. The chamber quaked, distant rumbles signaling the pinnacles' instability, vents hissing beyond the walls. Lirael stepped forward, wind coiling her legs like invisible serpents. "We saw the logs, Terry. Your father's hand in every vein. And you—knew parts, buried them." Her voice sliced sharp, but her gaze flicked to the breach behind him, where scuttler claws scraped the edge. Terry rose, emitter leveled—not at them, but the closing tear, sealing it with a quick plasma weld that fused the edges in molten seams. "I pieced it together same as you. But splitting up gets us killed. The engine's here—blueprints point to a core nexus." He glanced at the conduits, tracing a path: overload the nearest vein to flood the chamber, force a reveal of the engine's access. Peril: Backlash could mutate the room, turn air toxic. But together,

they could shield and strike. Elara's arrow tip wavered, her breath fogging in the chill. Jax and Mira tumbled through next, the breach winking shut behind, sealing the accusations in with them. The chamber's floor buckled, a new portal flickering at its heart—beckoning with deeper shadows, the engine's buzz vibrating through bone. Lirael lowered her hands fractionally, lightning dancing between fingers, as Elara's bow creaked. Terry held his ground, emitter buzzing, waiting for the fracture to mend or widen. A vein throbbed overhead, dripping corruption that sizzled on the grating; he raised the device, threading plasma toward it, aiming to cauterize before it spread.

The plasma lance sizzled from Terry's emitter, a searing blue-white bolt that struck the overhead vein like a hammer on hot iron. Black ichor sprayed in a foul arc, sizzling as it evaporated mid-air, the scent of ozone sharpening to mask the burnt-sugar stench. The conduit spasmed, shards of crystallized corruption cracking and tumbling to the grating below, where they pinged like brittle glass before dissolving into acrid steam. Terry's shoulders tensed, the recoil vibrating up his arm, but he held steady, watching the vein seal into a charred scar. Elara's bow didn't lower. Her eyes, shadowed under frost-rimed lashes, bored into him. "That log we pulled from the beacon—your father's signature on every rune. Experiments that birthed this nightmare. And you, Terry? Those 'suppressed memories' in the slate's code. You buried them deeper than any breach." Lirael's static crackled louder, coiling winds whipping loose strands of her hair into a frenzy. She planted her boots wider, the floor's buckle sending a tremor through her knees. "We trusted your weaves to fix this. But if you're carrying his ghosts, they're dragging us all under." Her fingers flexed, sparks leaping to scorch the air, not quite aimed but close enough to singe Terry's sleeve. Jax, the stocky rifleman with a bandaged thigh, shoved to his feet from the roll, weapon sweeping the chamber's edges. Mira, limping beside him with her arm in a makeshift sling, probed the conduits, her face pale under smeared grime. The new portal at the chamber's heart pulsed erratically, its edges fraying like torn fabric, exhaling a chill that frosted the metal walls. Terry holstered the emitter with a deliberate snap, his jaw clenching as he met their stares. "Doubt me now, and we're meat for the scuttlers clawing at

the walls. Father's work was twisted—syndicate hijacked it. I remember fragments: labs, warnings he encoded to stop them. But arguing here? That's the fracture they want." He nodded toward the portal, its buzz rising like a swarm of distant engines. "Through there, to the spires. Blueprints show the engine's nexus beyond. We overload it together, or Frostveil swallows us whole." A low groan reverberated from the chamber's far wall, the grating heaving as geothermal vapors punched through a seam. Steam blasted upward in a scalding plume, forcing Mira to stagger back; it caught her boot, blistering leather and drawing a hissed curse as she shook it off, skin reddening beneath. Jax fired a burst into the fissure—cracks spiderwebbing the ice-infused metal, suppressing the sizzle—but the ground shuddered again, wider splits yawning like hungry maws. Elara loosed her arrow not at Terry, but into the nearest split. The shaft, tipped with a glowing herbal incendiary, ignited on impact, flames blooming to cauterize the vent's edge. Vines erupted from the arrow's fletching, thorny tendrils snaking into the crack to bind it shut, roots grinding stone with audible crunches. "Fine. Lead. But one wrong weave, and loyalty snaps like those vines." Her voice carried an edge, fingers already nocking another shaft, knuckles still blanching. Lirael exhaled sharply, winds subsiding to a brisk gust that cleared the steam. "Tactical. Overload the veins en route—draw out the guardians without mutating us first." She glanced at Jax and Mira, who nodded grimly, rifles primed. The group edged toward the portal, boots scraping over buckling plates, the air thickening with the metallic tang as corruption dripped from higher conduits. They plunged through the flickering tear, the void's tug twisting their guts like a wrung cloth. Emergence slammed them onto a sloping ledge of the mist-veiled spires—towering obsidian pillars wreathed in perpetual fog, their bases rooted in thawing permafrost. Geothermal fissures snaked the ground, belching sulfurous geysers that melted ice into treacherous slush, the heat clashing with Frostveil's bite to fog breaths and slick surfaces. Distant rumbles shook the spires, sending chunks of ice shelf calving into abyssal drops below. Swarm-chitter echoed from the mist. Rift-scuttlers burst from a nearby crevice—chitinous horrors the size of hounds, their crystalline shells pulsing with black veins, legs ending in lacerating barbs. One lunged at Jax, barb raking his calf; he

roared, firing point-blank. The round punched through shell, exploding inward with a wet crack, ichor spraying to corrode his boot's edge. He dropped to one knee, blood welling hot, but rolled aside as another scuttler pounced, its weight cratering the slush. Terry's emitter whirred, unleashing a plasma grid—a lattice of superheated beams that swept the swarm. Shells melted in pops of molten slag, limbs severing to flop twitching on the ground, the air filling with the sharp crackle of vaporizing corruption. But a reforming abomination shard coalesced from the debris—a hulking mass of jagged ice and tarry flesh, tendrils whipping like flails. It barreled toward Elara, a tendril glancing her shoulder; the impact hurled her sideways, slamming her against a spire's base. Ribs protested with a sharp twinge, breath escaping in a gasp, but she twisted mid-fall, vines surging from her palms to ensnare the shard's core. Thorns pierced deep, roots burrowing to split it from within, chunks of corrupted ice shattering outward in a spray that pelted the group like hail. Lirael summoned a tempest, gales screaming to batter the remnants. Lightning forked from her hands, striking a scuttler's cluster—bodies convulsing in electric spasms, shells fracturing with reports like thunderclaps. The blast's backlash singed her palms, nerves tingling numb, but she pressed on, winds shoving the abomination shard into a geothermal vent. The geyser erupted beneath it, scalding steam boiling ichor to steam, the shard's form bubbling and collapsing in a sizzle of dissolving mass. Mira covered their flank, rifle crackling suppressed rounds that punched through scuttler eyes, bursting orbs in sprays of viscous fluid. But the accusations lingered, unspoken barbs amid the chaos. As the swarm thinned, Elara pushed to her feet, wincing with each step, her gaze locking on Terry. "Your father's blueprints—those 'warnings'? They detailed mutations like this. Engineered. And you pieced it without a word? We're not your lab rats." Terry fired a final bolt into a straggling scuttler, the projectile vaporizing its head in a flash that left afterimages dancing in his vision. He turned, emitter lowering, but his stance stiffened—a subtle lean forward, chin lifting in defiance. "I told you: fragments. Nightmares he locked away to protect me. Syndicate twisted them into weapons. Question me after we end it." His free hand clenched the data slate at his belt, thumb tracing its edge, the holographic logs flickering faintly. Lirael's

winds died to a breeze, her chest heaving, sweat beading despite the cold. She stepped between them, eyes flicking to the spires' threshold—a arched gateway etched with glowing runes, mist swirling thicker there. "Enough. That guardian mirage the logs warned of—it's stirring. Feel the pull?" The ground quaked, ice shelves groaning overhead, a massive slab cracking free to crash nearby, sending shockwaves that buckled knees and sprayed slush. From the gateway, the hallucinatory guardian manifested—not ethereal, but solidifying into a titanic spectral warrior, armored in rime-forged plates veined with pulsating corruption. Its axe, a blade of crystallized ice and tar, swung in a wide arc, the whoosh parting air with a chill gust that frosted exposed skin. Illusions peeled from its form—phantom duplicates flickering to life, each lashing with deceptive strikes that drew real blood. The warrior charged, axe cleaving toward Terry. He raised a kinetic shield, the impact jarring his arms like a sledgehammer blow, energy rippling to hurl him back several paces, boots sliding in slush. Elara's vines lashed out, coiling the duplicates' legs—thorns sinking to anchor them, but the real guardian shattered the bindings with a stomp, seismic force cracking the ledge and widening a fissure beneath Jax. He teetered, grabbing Mira's outstretched arm; she hauled him back, but the drop's edge crumbled further, swallowing gear into the void. Lirael unleashed a lightning torrent, bolts chaining across the illusions—duplicates exploding in bursts of steam and shards that lacerated arms and faces, shallow gashes welling with blood. The guardian roared, a bellow that vibrated bones, its axe sweeping low to catch her mid-stride. The flat caught her thigh, the blunt force buckling her leg, pain lancing white-hot as muscle bruised deep, forcing her to stagger against a spire for support. "Split the illusions—target the core!" Terry bellowed, emitter surging with a plasma bolt that pierced the guardian's chest plate, melting a hole that oozed molten rivulets, the heat warping nearby air into wavering heat haze. But Elara hesitated, arrow trained on him for a split second longer than needed. "Your weave—it's feeding the mirage. Father's echo in the runes?" The doubt fractured them. Jax and Mira peeled off toward a side ledge, firing suppressive volleys to cover their own angle, shouts lost in the din. Lirael limped forward alone, winds whipping to isolate a duplicate, her isolation a tactical wedge. Elara nocked and loosed at the guardian, but

her path veered from the group, vines rooting her stance apart. Terry intensified the assault, plasma grid flaring to bisect the warrior—torso splitting in a cascade of fracturing ice and sizzling tar, the halves toppling to crater the ground. But the victory rang hollow; the gateway's runes flared brighter, a new portal yawning at its heart, shadows within buzzing with the engine's core thrum. The team splintered—Elara vanishing into the mist with a final glare, Lirael hobbling toward a venting fissure for cover, Jax and Mira signaling retreat to higher ground. Terry stood amid the debris, emitter hot in his grip, the portal's pull tugging at his coat like insistent fingers, alliances sundered as the spires trembled toward collapse.

Terry's boots thudded over splintered ice, the emitter's barrel still glowing incandescent against the chill. Frostveil's mist coiled thicker now, laced with the acrid tang of sulfur from hidden vents. The spires loomed ahead, jagged silhouettes piercing the haze like frozen spears, their bases etched with faint, pulsating glyphs that buzzed a low vibration through the ground. He surveyed the debris-strewn threshold, pulse thundering in sync with the portal's insistent whir—a vortex of swirling azure and black, wide enough to swallow a skiff. "Elara!" His voice sliced through, reverberating off the ice walls, but only a faint rustle answered from the fog. Lirael's silhouette stuttered near the fissure, her form hunched as she pressed a hand to her bruised thigh, crimson seeping through torn fabric. Jax and Mira had vanished up the ledge, their rifle reports sporadic, pinning something unseen in the shadows. A low clatter rose from the frost—rift-scuttlers, their crystalline legs scraping like fracturing glass. Dozens burst from cracks in the shelf, bodies gleaming with oily veins, mandibles dripping viscous ichor that sizzled on contact with the ice. Terry raised his emitter, thumb flicking the charge. Plasma pierced out in a searing arc, atomizing the lead scuttler's shell into a burst of steam and charred fragments. The shot's recoil jolted his shoulder, heat blooming against his glove. But more swarmed, talons gouging grooves as they flanked him. He twisted, kinetic shield flaring—a translucent dome that repelled a leaping one's pounce, sending it tumbling with a chitinous snap. The air thickened with their chittering, a cacophony that drowned his thoughts, mingled with the distant groan of collapsing shelves

upstream. Lirael staggered from her cover, gales screaming from her outstretched palms to whip the swarm into a frenzy. Gales battered the scuttlers, hurling clusters against the spires where they splintered like brittle porcelain, fragments raining down in glittering death. Yet her face twisted in pain, each step a limp that slowed her weave. "Terry—flank left! They're reforming!" He nodded, but doubt gnawed. Her words carried an edge, not just tactical. The beacon log they'd snatched earlier burned in his mind—holographic snippets from the slate, projecting his father's voice amid schematics of twisted Nexus-weaves. "Stabilize the core... harness the corruption as fuel." Suppressed memories flickered: lab nights, his father's hands guiding his on rune pads, whispers of "greater power" that he'd buried under academy pride. A geothermal vent detonated nearby, expelling blistering steam that melted ice into slush underfoot. Terry slipped, boots sliding as a scuttler lunged. He fired point-blank, the bolt punching through its thorax in a spray of superheated fluid that singed his coat. The reek of burnt chitin clawed his nostrils, metallic and foul. Elara burst from the fog, vines trailing from her gauntlets like living whips. They cracked out, coiling a trio of scuttlers mid-leap—thorns skewering joints, hauling them to the ground where they thrashed, legs flailing in futile spasms. Her eyes met his, hard as glacial facets. "We need to regroup. Now." She didn't wait for agreement, arrow already nocked, unleashing a shaft that embedded in a scuttler's eye with a wet pop, the creature convulsing as herbal toxin foamed from the wound. They converged at the spires' base, Jax and Mira rappelling down to join, faces smeared with frost and sweat. "Clear for a breath," Jax grunted, reloading his rifle with trembling hands. Mira nodded, gaze probing the portal's edge where shadows writhed, hinting at deeper forms. Yet unity frayed like thawing rope. Lirael leaned against a rune-etched pillar, respiration labored. "That log... your father's voice. He built this engine. The beacons, the breaches—they're his design, twisted for their weapons." Her fingers clenched the pillar's edge, knuckles blanching, gales eddying fitfully around her boots. Terry's jaw clenched, emitter lowering a fraction. "He was experimenting. To fix the Sundering's scars. Not... this." The words tasted hollow, even to him. A suppressed flash: his father in the underbelly labs, injecting corruption samples into conduits, eyes alight with fervor.

He'd dismissed it as progress, but now? Elara's vines retracted with a snap, her stance widening as if bracing for a blow. "Fix? Those schematics show corruption conduits laced into Nexus grids. Your weaves, Terry—they're echoing his. Feeding the mirages, amplifying the guardians." Her voice dropped, tactical precision masking the accusation. "How many 'experiments' did you run blind, thinking you knew better?" The group fell silent, the only sound the portal's buzz and distant ice cracks. Jax shifted uneasily, rifle slung low. Mira's hand hovered near her sidearm, eyes flicking between them. Tension coiled, physical as the vents' rising steam. Terry's smirk stuttered, condescending even in defense—a tilt of his chin, emitter gesturing dismissively. "Blind? I sealed breaches you couldn't touch with your tempests. If Father's work has echoes, it's because the syndicate stole it. We're closing this, not debating ghosts." Lirael's laugh barked, short and bitter, her limp carrying her a step closer. "Ghosts? That guardian nearly dropped us because your plasma lit the glyphs like a signal flare. Suppressed memories or not, you're his echo—arrogant enough to wield the corruption without questioning." She jabbed a finger, gales gusting sharper, scattering frost motes that stung like needles. Elara's bow creaked under her grip, arrow tip dipping toward the ground but never fully lowering. "We followed you into this frozen hell, Terry. But if your 'precision' keeps splintering us..." The implication hung, her gaze locking his, empathetic fire turning to wary steel. The accusations landed like blows, fracturing the air. Jax cleared his throat, voice low. "Hostiles incoming—scuttler horde, east ledge. And something bigger reforming from the fragments." His scope glinted as he sighted, but the group's divide slowed their pivot. Before Terry could retort, the spires quivered—a low rumble building to a seismic shudder. Abomination fragments from the fallen guardian stirred, ice and tar knitting into a towering form: a quadruped behemoth, rime-plated limbs stomping craters, crystalline tusks grinding as it reared. From its sides, corruption conduits throbbed, spawning swarms of clattering crystalline sprites that buzzed like hornets, wings slicing air with razor edges. "Form up!" Terry snapped, emitter charging with a shrill whir. But hesitation rippled—Lirael hung back, gales faltering; Elara's vines lashed defensively, carving a barrier that separated her from the center. The behemoth barreled forward, tusks low-

ered, earth lurching under its bulk. Sprites dove, one slashing Mira's arm in a spray of crimson, her cry sharp as she fired wildly. Jax's rifle crackled, slugs ricocheting off rime shields in sparks. Terry unleashed a plasma lattice, beams crisscrossing to scorch the brute's pelt—molten rivulets gouging furrows, the reek of ozone and charred flesh blooming thick. Elara's arrows whistled, piercing conduits to erupt purple ooze that sizzled on ice, but her shots veered wide of supporting him, prioritizing the sprites harrying Lirael. Lirael summoned a tempest, lightning leaping from cloudless skies to fork into the behemoth's hinges—splits webbing its limbs, thunder vibrating ribs. Yet her focus splintered; a sprite nicked her shoulder, eliciting a gasp of agony as spectral chill infiltrated, deadening sinew. The brute thundered, a seismic stomp broadening breaches. Thermal springs detonated, blinding veils of scalding mist that triggered hacks and stumbles. Terry's barrier buckled under a tusk rake, the blow hurling him against a spire—back smashing stone, breath exploding from lungs. He tasted copper, metallic on his tongue, as he rolled, firing a desperate bolt that bored into the creature's underbelly, ichor gushing hot and sticky. Elara and Lirael closed in, vines and gales converging to snare the brute's core limb, pinning the brute's core. They forged ahead, severing limbs in sprays of frozen gore, the atmosphere thick with the screech of crystal on crystal, the bitter tang of plasma-scorched ice. Terry fused his Nexus-weave, plasma lattice merging with Lirael's lightning and Elara's vines, a titanic lattice that enveloped the claw. Energies collided in the roar of thunder and blaze, joints fracturing under the strain, brute's bulk convulsing. With a final, resonant bellow that vibrated through bones and set teeth rattling, the claw retracted into the breach, the wound sealing in a convulsion of collapsing edges. Fragments of crystal rained down, one nicking Elara's thigh and pinning her momentarily, the weight bruising muscle deep enough to hobble her stride, forcing a stifled curse as she shoved it free. But victory curdled as the armored leader, cloaked in shadowed exosuit plates, gauntlet raised. "You delay the inevitable," he sneered, voice modulated through a grille, activating a secondary portal with a surge of breach-energy. The maelstrom yawned open, a swirling maw of frost-rimed darkness that tugged at the air, pulling grit and embers into its howling core. The pull yanked Terry forward first, boots scraping on

ashen scree. Elara lunged to grab his arm, but the suction tore her loose, slamming her against Lirael. Harlan bellowed orders, squad members firing grapples that snapped taut, only for the lines to fray against the portal's edge. One by one, they tumbled in, the volcanic heat giving way to a biting chill that clawed at lungs. They spilled out onto a frozen expanse, crystalline petals of ice blooming underfoot, the sky a bruised indigo swirling with snowflake gales. Remote thunders reverberated from steaming oases, where towering shapes stirred in the geothermal haze, a new sub-realm teeming with frozen abominations that turned toward the intruders with resonant, shattering cries. Terry rolled to his feet, plasma gauntlets reigniting with a spark, as the first frost-laced tendril snaked from the snow, crunching into the brittle snowpack.

Chapter 15: Shattered Bonds in the Frost-fire Void

The portal's maw spat them out in a tangle of limbs and frost-bitten air, the rift's edge clamping shut behind with a resonant crack that echoed off jagged ice spires. Terry hit the ground first, his boots skidding across a crust of refrozen slush, the impact jarring his emitter from his hip. He scrambled up, fingers numb from the sudden chill, scanning the fractured expanse: towering pinnacles of blue-veined ice loomed like broken teeth, while steam hissed from fissures in the permafrost, carrying the sharp tang of sulfur laced with that unmistakable ozone burn of corruption. Elara landed beside him with a grunt, her cloak whipping in a geothermal gust, already nocking an arrow to her composite bow. Lirael tumbled last, rolling to her knees and clutching her side where a fresh gash wept blood, her breath fogging in ragged bursts. No time for reassessment—the air thrummed with skittering claws. From the shadows of a nearby crevasse, a pack of frost-laced abominations lunged: hulking shapes with fur matted in crystalline rime, their fangs elongated into serrated icicles that dripped melting venom. Flanking them scuttled crystalline crawlers, their carapaces glinting like shattered quartz, legs clicking in a frenzied rhythm. Terry's hand flew to his emitter, thumbing the activation rune. He weighed

the angles: the abominations barreled straight on, too bulky to dodge left into the steam vent's scalding plume, but the scuttlers swarmed from the right, their numbers promising to overwhelm if he funneled plasma that way. Risk of friendly fire pinned him—Elara's position overlapped the crawlers' path. Goal: thin the herd upfront to buy space. He pivoted, unleashing a lattice of superheated plasma arcs that sizzled through the air, carving molten furrows into the lead abomination's flank. The beast roared, a guttural bellow that shattered nearby ice shards, but black ichor sprayed from the wounds, sizzling on the frost. Elara loosed her arrow, the shaft blooming mid-flight into thorny vines that lashed out, coiling around a scuttler's legs and yanking it off-balance. The vine's barbs pierced chitin with wet crunches, but the crawler thrashed, spraying shards that forced her to leap back, her heel cracking through a thin ice shelf. She cursed under her breath, eyes flicking to Lirael—too slow, the wound slowing her draw. Elara considered binding the gash with a hasty growth weave, but the abominations closed in; better to entangle the bigger threats first. Her next shot targeted a hulking brute's forelimbs, vines erupting to snare and snap joints with fibrous whips. Lirael pushed to her feet, ignoring the fire in her ribs—fleeing into the spires meant exposure to hidden fissures, shooting blindly risked exhausting her reserves too soon. Immediate aim: disrupt the swarm's momentum. She channeled a gale of lightning, the bolts forking from her outstretched palm in jagged blue streaks, hammering the scuttlers' cluster. Electricity arced across their shells, exploding two into scattering fragments, but the backlash singed her fingertips, and a stray bolt glanced off an abomination's hide, merely enraging it further. The beast charged her, icicle fangs bared. "Flank it!" Terry barked, his voice cutting through the din, but Lirael shot him a glare, her jaw tightening as she sidestepped the lunge, the claws gouging furrows in the ice where she'd stood. Elara's vines caught the abomination's hind leg, hauling it off course, but not before its swipe raked Lirael's arm, drawing a hiss of pain. She retaliated with a point-blank surge, lightning coiling around the beast's maw and blasting its skull apart in a spray of steam and charred bone. The skirmish ebbed as the last scuttler shattered under Terry's plasma lance, its remnants skittering into a fissure. But the victory hung brittle. Elara lowered her bow, wiping ichor

from her cheek, her gaze hardening on Terry. “You hesitated on that lattice. Nearly clipped me.” Her fingers flexed around the bowstring, knuckles whitening—not just fatigue, but accusation sharpening her tone. Terry holstered his emitter, breath steaming, but his shoulders squared in defiance, a smirk tugging at his lip despite the frostbite nipping his ears. “Hesitated? I cleared the path you charged into blind. If you’d held position—” He cut off as Lirael rounded on him, her bandaged arm trembling, blood seeping through the hasty wrap. “Position? Like your ‘precise’ weaves that keep dragging us into these hells?” Lirael’s voice cracked like fracturing ice, her free hand clenching into a fist, nails digging crescents into her palm. The wound throbbed, but it was the betrayal in her eyes that burned hotter—trust fraying since the spires, when Elara and she had pushed ahead without him. “We’re bleeding because you chase ghosts from that slate, not because we follow your lead.” Elara stepped between them, but her posture leaned away from Terry, arms crossing like a barrier. The air between them crackled, not with magic, but the weight of unspoken fractures—Elara’s loyalty torn, Lirael’s caution now outright suspicion. Terry’s jaw ticked, but he scanned ahead instead: a pulsating glow throbbed from the realm’s core, the syndicate beacon winking through the spires like a corrupt heart. “Argue later. That thing’s calling more. We overload it or get buried.” They pressed on, boots crunching over brittle ice, the geothermal fissures belching heat that warred with the biting cold. Steam vents obscured paths, forcing detours around bubbling pools where corruption veins pulsed beneath, oily black tendrils questing like blind worms. Injuries mounted: Elara’s ankle twisted on a hidden crack, Lirael’s gash reopened with each swing of her arm, and Terry’s emitter hummed erratically, its core frosting over. Deeper in, the hallucinations struck—not whispers, but assaults that clawed at their senses. Terry blinked as the spires warped; Elara’s form twisted before him, her face elongating into a snarling shadow beast’s maw, the air filling with the acrid smoke of burning groves. His stomach lurched, nausea doubling him over, knees buckling as phantom heat seared his skin. He shook it off, emitter raised—real or not, the threat loomed physical now, tendrils snaking from a nearby vein toward the vision. Elara, meanwhile, staggered, assaulted by visions of her orphaned past: spectral raiders materializing,

their blades whistling close enough to slice air, the ground beneath her buckling with illusory quakes that sent her sprawling into real slush. Lirael fared no better; screams echoed in her ears—her family's death cries, amplified until her head pounded with migraine spikes, needles of pain lancing behind her eyes. She clutched her temples, vision blurring with ghostly highland flames, but a tendril lashed her leg, the real sting grounding her. "It's the voids," she gasped, forcing a gale to disperse the phantoms, the wind shearing through the illusions and severing a corruption strand with crackling force. Reluctance hung heavy, but survival demanded alliance. Terry nodded curtly to Elara, who summoned thorny vines to bind the vein's base, the growths burrowing into ice and pulsing black ichor. Lirael channeled lightning into the knots, the electricity superheating the bindings until they smoked and burst. Terry jury-rigged his emitter to the beacon's exposed core—a throbbing obelisk of ferrocrete laced with runes—overloading it with a feedback loop of plasma. The device whined, fissures spiderwebbing its surface, but the backlash erupted: a regenerating frostfire leviathan coalesced from the shards, its colossal form undulating with veins of fire and ice, colossal jaws unhinging to belch a gale that hurled debris like shrapnel. They dove into motion—Elara's vines snaring a limb to anchor it, Lirael's gales battering its eyes with frozen hail, Terry's lances piercing joints to expose glowing conduits. The beast thrashed, claws rending spires and spraying ichor that burned like acid on contact. A tail sweep caught Lirael, flinging her against ferrocrete chunks; she rose spitting blood, but her next tempest cracked the leviathan's hide, buying Terry the shot to core it. As the beast slumped, dissolving into steaming sludge, the beacon detonated in a contained blast, sealing a minor breach with a vacuum suck of air. But victory soured. A hologram flickered to life from the obelisk's ruins: the armored leader, visage obscured, voice modulator droning. "Prince's spawn. Your father's weaves didn't stabilize the rifts—they birthed them. His research fuels our engine. Join or fracture." The words landed like blows. Terry's hand froze mid-reach for a data fragment, his smirk vanishing into a scowl, fingers curling as if to crush the projection. Elara's eyes widened, her bow sagging, while Lirael barked a laugh—bitter, disbelieving—her wounded arm dropping limp. Trust splintered further, accusations bubbling

unspoken. The ground trembled, spatial distortions rippling outward, ice buckling into warp. A fissure yawned, hurling them toward it—Terry lunged for Elara's arm, but the pull yanked them apart, bodies tumbling into the void's embrace. Lirael's gale caught a spire's edge, buying a desperate grip as the distortion swallowed the rest.

The distortion's maw clamped shut with a thunderous snap, severing the air like a guillotine blade. Terry cartwheeled through churning ether, the world inverting in a blur of fractured ice and sulfurous steam. His emitter clattered against his thigh, its hum stuttering as gravitational tugs warred for his limbs—yank left toward a jagged floe, or spin right into a geothermal plume that would scald his suit? He twisted mid-tumble, firing a kinetic burst from his gauntlet to propel himself away from the rising heat, the recoil slamming his shoulder against a whipping tendril of warped space. The immediate goal burned clear: stabilize rotation before impact. A spire loomed, its facets glinting like shattered diamonds; he angled his boots' thrusters, scraping along the edge with a shower of sparks that bit into his palms. Elara plummeted nearby, her cloak billowing like a frayed sail. She twisted, loosing an arrow that sprouted into a coiling vine mid-air, latching onto a protruding crystal to arrest her fall. The vine groaned under strain, fibers snapping as she dangled, boots kicking at empty void. Below, the Frostfire Void sprawled in renewed savagery: spires twisted sharper now, laced with fresh veins of pulsing crimson that wept molten droplets into hissing pools. Scuttlers skittered across the ice—iridescent chitin glinting, mandibles clicking in rhythmic hunger—while larger shapes lumbered from fissures, their hides fused with frost-rimed barbs that dripped corrosive slurry. Lirael dangled from her perch, knuckles whitening on the spire's ledge, her free hand weaving frantic gestures to summon a downdraft. The gale howled, shoving her upward inch by inch, but a scuttler swarm crested the ridge, their legs puncturing the ice like needles. One latched onto her boot, jagged mouth grinding against reinforced leather; she stomped down, crushing its carapace with a wet crunch, but the motion loosened her grip. "Not... today," she growled through gritted teeth, channeling a bolt that arced into the cluster, shattering three in a spray of frozen shards that pelted her face like

hailstones. Terry hit the floe first, rolling to absorb the jolt, bones jarring as he came up firing. A plasma lance speared the nearest abomination—a hulking brute with icicle tusks protruding from a maw of churning gears—melting its flank into bubbling slag. The thing bellowed, charging with earth-shaking stomps that cracked the ice beneath. Flee to the ridge for cover, or stand and flank? The risk of the thinning shelf held him: one wrong step, and he'd plunge into the abyss. He opted for evasion, sidestepping as its tusks gouged furrows, then countering with a shield pulse that hurled it back, tusks embedding in a spire with a resonant clang. Elara dropped beside him, vine retracting in a whipcrack. "That hologram—your father's work? You knew?" Her voice sliced sharper than any blade, fingers flexing around her bowstring as if debating whether to nock an arrow at him or the scuttlers now boiling over the edge. "Not now," Terry snapped, emitter whining as he calibrated a lattice—interlocking beams to corral the swarm. But doubt flickered; the leader's words clawed at him, a physical weight pressing his chest. He shoved it down, prioritizing the tangible: three scuttlers vectoring on Elara's flank. "Left—bind them!" She loosed a volley, seeds blooming into thorny snares that erupted from the ice, coiling around legs and squeezing until chitin splintered. One broke free, leaping with claws extended; Elara rolled aside, the strike carving gashes in her cloak that smoked on contact. Her breath hitched, a fresh gash blooming on her forearm from the earlier leviathan swipe, blood freezing in crimson beads. Lirael crested the ridge at last, landing in a crouch that buckled her wounded knee. She rose with a hiss, arm hanging awkward, but her eyes blazed. "Prince's legacy—explains your blind faith in those toys. Nearly got us vaporized back there." Lightning crackled between her fingers, not aimed yet, but the threat hung electric. A brute lumbered toward her, its frost-laced hide shrugging off a glancing bolt; she dodged its swipe, the claw whistling past her ear, close enough to shear a lock of hair. The accusations hung amid the fray, trust fraying like Elara's cloak. Terry's jaw tightened, a vein pulsing in his temple as he weighed retorts—defend the data, or focus fire? The scuttlers' chittering swelled, a dozen more spilling from a nearby fissure, their advance herding the group toward a steaming crevasse. "Beacon's that way," he barked, pointing to a distant glow pulsing like a infected heart amid the spires. "We overload

it, or we're chum. Move!" They pressed forward in ragged formation, the ice treacherous underfoot—cracks spiderwebbing with each geothermal burp that spewed superheated mist, scalding exposed skin. Elara took point, vines probing ahead to test weak spots, but a hallucinatory void bloomed without warning: the air thickened, carrying the acrid tang of smoke and charred wood. Before her, the mist coalesced into shadowy raiders—hulking figures with blades glinting, their faces twisting into the beasts that razed her village. She froze, bow trembling; one lunged, phantom steel slicing her vision, drawing a phantom sting across her ribs that made her gasp, real nausea roiling her gut as knees buckled. "Elara—snap it!" Terry's voice cut through, but his own assault hit: the ice warped, birthing a spectral academy hall, walls buckling under riftblight. His father's silhouette loomed, not the hero of logs, but a twisted engineer, hands dripping oily corruption as he wove rifts wider. The vision pressed, a migraine exploding behind his eyes like shrapnel, needles pricking his skull until he staggered, emitter slipping from sweat-slick fingers. Risk of dropping it—lose the weapon, lose the edge. He clenched it, firing blindly; the plasma bolt shattered the illusion in a burst of static, but the pain lingered, vision spotting. Lirael fared no better. A whirlwind of sleet engulfed her, manifesting as the storm elemental's roar—towering, elemental fury ripping villages asunder. Screams echoed, not hers, but her family's, the sound drilling into her ears like augers, forcing bile up her throat. She retched, doubling over as a scuttler exploited the gap, its claw raking her thigh in a real gash that wept blood. "Illusions—fight through!" she roared, but her tempest faltered, winds scattering harmlessly. Reluctance clashed with necessity; accusations simmered, but the scuttlers closed, mandibles gnashing. Terry lunged to Elara's side, hauling her upright by the elbow—his grip firm, not gentle—while scanning options: vine the illusions, or plasma the real threats? "Together—your growths on the voids, my lances on the bugs." She nodded curtly, jaw set, summoning roots that pierced the smoky raiders, their forms dissolving in oily bursts that eased the nausea. Lirael, wiping blood from her mouth, funneled gales into the whirlwind, the clash birthing thunderclaps that dispersed the elemental, though her head throbbed with residual echoes. United by force, they carved toward the beacon, a throbbing monolith veined with syndicate runes, its

base ringed by corruption tendrils that writhed like serpents. The air hummed with ozone, the structure's pulse syncing with their heartbeats, drawing more abominations: frost-laced horrors with barbs that launched like harpoons, embedding in ice and quivering. Elara bound a tendril's tip, thorns digging deep to stem its flow; Lirael superheated the knots with arcing bolts, the ichor boiling and popping like overripe fruit. Terry interfaced his emitter, fingers dancing over runes to siphon energy—feedback loop primed, but the risk loomed: overload too fast, and it'd chain-react, burying them in shards. The device whirred to life, fissures cracking its ferrocrete skin, but the leader's hologram reignited from a hidden projector, the armored form flickering amid the chaos. "Thorne, Voss—his bloodline dooms you. Father's shadows weave the engine's heart. Flee his spawn, or feed the void." The drone pierced like acid, Elara's vines faltering mid-growth, Lirael's lightning veering wild into a spire that crumbled in a cascade of debris. Terry's scowl deepened, knuckles blanching on the emitter as he poured plasma in, ignoring the burn climbing his arm. "Lies—focus!" But the words burrowed, his father's logs replaying in flashes: experiments twisted, rifts birthed. Elara's eyes narrowed, bow creaking taut; Lirael spat a curse, her storm coiling tighter, aimed at threats—or him? The beacon detonated in a contained inferno, tendrils withering to ash, sealing a subsidiary breach with a resonant implosion that sucked scuttlers into oblivion. Yet backlash birthed the leviathan anew—immense, regenerating from the ruins, its form a fusion of glacial bulk and infernal flames, jaws gaping to unleash a blistering gale laced with embers. Claws like scythes raked the ground, carving trenches that spewed steam. They scattered—Elara anchoring with vines to its flank, thorns burrowing to sap its regeneration; Lirael battering its maw with hail-laced tempests that cracked scales and drew bellows of rage; Terry targeting conduits with lances, each hit erupting in geysers of superheated vapor. The beast's tail lashed, catching Harlan's absent squad in memory—no, just echoes—but it clipped Lirael's shoulder, spinning her into a drift of snow that singed her skin. She rose coughing, blood flecking her lips, and unleashed a gale that pinned a limb long enough for Terry to core a joint, ichor fountaining in arcs that sizzled on contact. Cost mounted: Elara's gashes wept, staining the ice; Terry's emitter overheated,

scorching his palm; Lirael's limp worsened, each step a grind. The leviathan slumped at last, form fracturing into steaming fragments, but spatial warps rippled anew—fissures blooming like wounds, the void's pull intensifying. Terry grabbed for Elara again, this time securing her wrist as the ground buckled, Lirael diving to clasp his belt. They tumbled as one into the distortion's throat, bonds strained to breaking, hurtling toward a convergence where spires converged in a maelstrom of fire and frost. Elara's free hand clenched Terry's arm, not in trust, but desperation, as the warp spat them into denser chaos, a colossal rift yawning ahead like an insatiable maw.

The breach's grip loosened with a nauseating lurch, flinging them onto a jagged ledge that overlooked the titanic breach. Steam sizzled from fissures below, mingling with the acrid tang of melting stone. Terry struck the glacier first, rolling to cushion the blow, his emitter clattering across the rime before he snatched it back. Agony knifed through his scorched palm, but he buried it, gaze probing the chasm. Flames licked the breach's edges, spawning erratic jets of superheated air that warped the cold into blistering waves. Elara landed beside him, wrenching her arm free with a sharp twist. She staggered up, bow already in hand, her free fingers brushing a laceration on her thigh where blood seeped through torn leather. Lirael tumbled last, crashing into a drift that crumbled under her weight. She pushed to her knees, shoulder joint grinding audibly, and fixed Terry with a glare that could shatter glass. "Your seals keep birthing these things," she rasped, voice slicing through the breach's roar. Her hand flexed around her staff, sparks crackling unbidden along its length. "Blame the beacons, not me." Terry rose, emitter buzzing as he calibrated a hasty shield. The air thickened, pressure building like a storm about to break. From the breach's maw, frost-laced horrors clambered—towering forms of rime-crusted sinew, limbs ending in serrated blades that scraped sparks from the rock. Behind them scuttled crystalline hordes, their facets glinting like fractured diamonds, mandibles grinding in predatory rhythm. Elara nocked an arrow, the shaft twisting with thorny barbs that sprouted from her weave. "Flank left—vines to pin, then we core them." Her stance widened, boots grinding into the rime for purchase, revealing her vote for containment over chaos.

The first horror lunged, blade-arm sweeping in a wide arc that cleaved air with a whistle. Terry's shield flared, kinetic pulse deflecting the blow and sending cracks spiderwebbing across the glacier. He countered with a bolt of plasma, the beam punching through the creature's chest in a burst of vaporized rime. Steam billowed, obscuring the horde's advance. Lirael barked a laugh edged with bitterness. "Pin? They'll swarm us flat." She thrust her staff forward, unleashing a gale that hurled crystalline scuttlers back into the breach, their shells shattering on impact like brittle glass. They pressed forward along the ledge, the ground trembling underfoot. Horrors poured out, their hides pulsing with inner flames that melted channels in the glacier. Elara's vines erupted from a fissure, coiling around a beast's legs with a wet snap, thorns digging deep to draw oily ichor. The creature bellowed, thrashing to free itself, but she yanked the line taut, toppling it into the chasm. "There—now hit the hinges!" Her command carried a terse nod toward Terry, strategy overriding the simmer in her eyes. Terry obliged, plasma bolting true to shear a limb at the knee. The appendage hit the ledge with a thud, flames guttering out in a sizzle. But the horde adapted, scuttlers merging into a rolling wave that surged over the fallen horror, their crystals reforming into a makeshift ramp. Lirael's lightning forked out, gales whipping the air into frenzy, electrocuting a cluster mid-leap. Bodies burst in cascades of shards, raining down like lethal hail. Yet one scuttler latched onto her boot, mandibles grinding through leather. She stomped it flat, boot sole cracking the glacier, and shot Terry a sidelong glance. "Your tech's too slow for this tide." Injuries piled on. A blade grazed Elara's side, parting cloth and skin in a line that burned like fireweed sap. She hissed, pressing a vine-wrapped hand to staunch the flow, but kept firing—arrows embedding in scuttler eyes, exploding into thorny blooms that shredded ranks. Terry's shield buckled under a double assault, the impact jarring his teeth and numbing his arm. He poured energy into a lattice, the grid igniting to vaporize a swath of the horde, but the recoil scorched fresh welts across his forearm. Accusations flew amid the fray. "If you'd trusted the old weaves from the start—" Lirael started, her gale veering to clip a horror's flank, scales cracking like thunder. Terry whirled, emitter venting heat in a plume. "Your storms just feed the breaches! Father's logs

prove it—precision, not this wild force." His words hung, but he didn't wait for rebuttal, diving into the press to shield her from a scuttler's leap. The path narrowed to a bridge of precarious glacier spanning a geothermal pit, steam rising in scalding curtains. Beyond loomed the syndicate beacon, a throbbing obelisk of twisted metal and crystal at the realm's heart, conduits of corruption snaking from its base. Delirious voids flickered at the edges—pockets where the air shimmered, birthing mirages that clawed at the senses. Elara stepped onto the bridge first, vines probing for weak spots. A void yawned beside her, and suddenly the steam carried the reek of charred wood, flames licking phantom shadows where none burned. She froze, bow trembling as visions assailed: her grove ablaze, shadow beasts tearing through undergrowth. Her knees buckled, nausea twisting her gut like roots in soil, but she shook it off, arrow loosing into a real scuttler that clattered too close. "Illusions—target the beacon, ignore the rest!" Her voice cracked, but she advanced, thorns sprouting to reinforce the bridge's span. Lirael faltered next, a void brushing her path. The wind screamed with echoes of her village's screams, a migraine pounding like hammers on anvil, needles pricking behind her eyes until tears blurred her sight. She clutched her staff, lightning sputtering erratically, and blasted a corruption tendril snaking from the obelisk. "They're pulling our ghosts—use it, don't fight blind." Her grip whitened on the wood, a reluctant bridge to alliance. Terry's turn came mid-stride. The void enveloped him, father's voice booming in his ears—logs manifesting as holographic specters, experiments birthing breaches in vivid replay. His vision swam, stomach heaving as if punched, hubris's weight pressing like chains. But he channeled it, emitter syncing to the beacon's pulse. "Together—vines on the conduits, storms to overload." He extended a hand, not for aid, but to align their arcs. They converged on the obelisk. Elara's vines lashed out, thorns piercing tendrils that writhed like severed serpents, ichor spraying in arcs that sizzled on contact. Lirael's gales hammered the structure, lightning arcing to fracture crystals in explosive bursts. Terry's plasma lattice wove through, superheating conduits until metal glowed cherry-red, buckling under the strain. The beacon quivered, overload building. But a hologram flickered to life atop it—the armored leader's visor gleaming, voice modulator distorting into a mocking rasp. "Prince's spawn, still

chasing shadows? Your father didn't just study the taints—he forged them. The engine's heart beats with his code." The image zoomed on diagrams: paternal runes twisted into corruption amplifiers, breaches weaponized for multiversal siege. Elara's vines slackened a fraction, her jaw clenching as she glanced at Terry, arrow half-nocked. Lirael's storm faltered, eyes narrowing in a flicker of doubt before she thundered, "Lies won't save you!" and redoubled her assault. The obelisk quivered, overload building. But a hologram flickered to life atop it—the armored leader's visor gleaming, voice modulator distorting into a mocking rasp. "Prince's spawn, still chasing shadows? Your father didn't just study the corruptions—he forged them. The engine's heart beats with his code." The image zoomed on diagrams: paternal runes twisted into corruption amplifiers, breaches weaponized for multiversal siege. Elara's vines slackened a fraction, her jaw clenching as she glanced at Terry, arrow half-nocked. Lirael's storm faltered, eyes narrowing in a flicker of doubt before she thundered, "Lies won't save you!" and redoubled her assault. The beacon quivered, overload building. But a hologram flickered to life atop it—the armored leader's visor gleaming, voice modulator distorting into a mocking rasp. "Prince's spawn, still chasing shadows? Your father didn't just study the corruptions—he forged them. The engine's heart beats with his code." The image zoomed on diagrams: paternal runes twisted into corruption amplifiers, breaches weaponized for multiversal siege. Elara's vines slackened a fraction, her jaw clenching as she glanced at Terry, arrow half-nocked. Lirael's storm faltered, eyes narrowing in a flicker of doubt before she thundered, "Lies won't save you!" and redoubled her assault. The obelisk quivered, overload building. But a hologram flickered to life atop it—the armored leader's visor gleaming, voice modulator distorting into a mocking rasp. "Prince's spawn, still chasing shadows? Your father didn't just study the corruptions—he forged them. The engine's heart beats with his code." The image zoomed on diagrams: paternal runes twisted into corruption amplifiers, breaches weaponized for multiversal siege. Elara's vines slackened a fraction, her jaw clenching as she glanced at Terry, arrow half-nocked. Lirael's storm faltered, eyes narrowing in a flicker of doubt before she thundered, "Lies won't save you!" and redoubled her assault. The beacon quivered, overload building. But a hologram flickered to life

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Terry's emitter hummed in his grip, fingers dancing over the interface to spike the plasma feed. The beacon's core glowed brighter, fissures cracking along its obsidian flanks as Elara's vines coiled tighter, thorns digging into pulsing veins like barbs in flesh. Lirael's lightning arced in jagged forks, scorching the air with the tang of burnt ozone. The hologram's rasp cut off mid-snarl, the leader's image fracturing into static as the device buckled. A thunderclap erupted from the beacon's heart. Shards of crystal sprayed outward, slicing the frozen air. Terry dove left, boots skidding on rime-slick ice, his shield flaring to deflect a razor-edged fragment that whistled past his ear. The ground heaved, geothermal fissures belching steam that scalded his exposed neck. Elara rolled right, loosing an arrow that pierced a writhing tendril mid-snap, but the backlash hurled her against a jagged spire, her shoulder crunching against unyielding ice. Lirael staggered, her gales whipping snow into a blinding veil. "Keep pushing!" she barked, palms thrusting forward to summon another bolt that hammered the beacon's crown. The structure groaned, then imploded in a cascade of molten sparks and oily ichor. Corruption spewed forth, birthing a swarm of crystalline scuttlers—fist-sized horrors with legs like shattered glass, skittering across the frost with a screech like nails on slate. Terry scanned the chaos: flee toward the spires for cover, or stand and grid the swarm before it closed? The nearest fissure bubbled with heat, promising burns if he misstepped, but the scuttlers' advance left no room for retreat. He pivoted, emitter whining as he unleashed a lattice of plasma bolts—blue-white lances that vaporized the front rank in puffs of acrid steam. "Elara, bind the flanks! Lirael, clear the center!" Elara pushed up, blood trickling

from a gash on her brow, her fingers flexing to summon thorny vines that erupted from cracks in the ice, ensnaring clusters of scuttlers in crushing loops. The plants writhed, thorns grinding chitin to powder, but a scuttler leaped free, latching onto her calf with mandibles that pierced leather and flesh. She hissed, stomping it flat, the crunch echoing amid the swarm's chittering frenzy. Lirael channeled a gale that hurled a dozen scuttlers into a steaming vent, their shells popping like brittle eggs in the heat. Yet doubt lingered in her tightened jaw, her glance toward Terry sharp as a blade. The hologram's words hung between them—his father's code, twisted into this nightmare. She shook it off, focusing on the tangible: the scuttlers' legs gouging furrows in the ice, inching closer. The overload's echo faded, but the air thickened with a deeper rumble. From the beacon's ruins, a colossal shape coalesced—frostfire leviathan, its form a hulking mass of glacial armor veined with flickering flames. Tentacles of ice-laced magma lashed out, shattering a spire into avalanching debris. The ground quaked, fissures widening to swallow chunks of terrain. Terry's mind raced: target the joints to cripple it, or lure it toward the vents for a thermal kill? The beast's bulk blocked the path to the realm's core, where the outline pulsed like a second heart. Injuries burned—his arm throbbed from a near-miss shard—but the core beacon promised a way out, schematics or seals be damned. "We hit the core conduit! Elara, roots to anchor it. Lirael, storms on the vents!" Accusations boiled over as they advanced, the leviathan's roar drowning the wind. Elara nocked another arrow, her voice cutting through the din like a whip. "Your father's 'legacy' just woke that thing, Terry. How many more surprises from his genius?" Her shot flew true, embedding in a magma vein that sizzled and burst, spraying embers that singed Lirael's cloak. Terry fired a plasma lance into the beast's flank, melting a divot that steamed in the frost. Ice reformed almost instantly, regenerative crystals knitting the wound. "Focus on the fight, not ghosts! If it's lies, we'll prove it—after we survive." His words rang hollow even to him, the data slate's weight in his pack a leaden reminder. He dodged a tentacle swipe that pulverized ice where he'd stood, the impact vibrating up his legs. Lirael summoned a lightning torrent, bolts chaining across the leviathan's armored hide, cracking segments with explosive pops. Sparks danced, illuminating her scowl.

"Prodigy or not, your family's meddling got us here. Chasing your redemption won't seal these rifts." A hallucinatory void yawned nearby—a swirling distortion in the air, birthing phantoms from their pasts. Elara froze first, eyes widening at visions of shadow beasts tearing through her grove, their howls manifesting as gusts that clawed her skin like invisible talons. She gasped, knees buckling from a wave of phantom pain, ribs aching as if crushed anew. Terry blinked against his own assault: the Sundering's oily blight seeping from academy walls, but twisted—his father's silhouette amid the chaos, hands weaving the corruption. The smell of burnt sugar choked him, nausea roiling his gut until he retched bile onto the ice. He shook it off, emitter raised; no time for ghosts when scuttlers swarmed his boots, their legs pricking like needles. Lirael fared worst, the void conjuring her village's storm elemental—a colossal whirlwind of debris and lightning that solidified into battering winds, slamming her against a crevasse lip. Her ears rang with screams that weren't there, a migraine pounding like hammers on her skull. "Not... real," she growled, forcing a gale to disperse the illusion, the effort leaving her swaying. Reluctant alliance snapped back: Terry's shield expanded, a kinetic bubble that shoved the leviathan's tentacle aside with a resonant boom. Elara's vines lashed out, coiling around a joint to yank it off-balance, thorns drawing rivulets of molten ichor that hissed on the ground. Lirael funneled her tempest into a focused gale, propelling Terry forward for a point-blank plasma grid that bored into the core conduit—a throbbing nexus of frost and fire. The leviathan bellowed, regenerative surges healing faster now, spawning more scuttlers from its underbelly. They pressed on, severing corruption tendrils that whipped like flails, each snap releasing bursts of oily spores that burned lungs and blurred vision. Elara's arrows pinned writhing limbs; Lirael's bolts shattered crystal armor; Terry's lances cauterized wounds before they knit. They reached the core beacon—a pulsating obelisk etched with syndicate runes, its surface crawling with veins. Terry interfaced his emitter, uploading an overload sequence, fingers slick with sweat. Elara bound the base with roots that delved into fissures, anchoring against the quakes. Lirael wove lightning into a cage around it, arcs grounding into the ice with ear-splitting cracks. The device trembled, energy building to a crescendo. But the hologram

reignited, the armored leader's voice a venomous hiss. "Foolish trio. Prince's blood runs with the blight's architect. He didn't contain the Sundering—he ignited it for power. Your seals? Mere echoes of his ambition." Diagrams flared: blueprints of multiversal engines, paternal sigils warped into amplifiers that funneled Riftblight like a weaponized flood. Terry's hand faltered on the interface, a smirk twisting his lip in denial, but Elara's vines tightened involuntarily, squeezing the obelisk until stone groaned. Lirael's eyes flashed with fury, her storm surging wild, cracking the air. Overload hit. The beacon erupted in a dome of crackling energy, hurling them back. Scuttlers vaporized in the blast; the leviathan recoiled, its form fracturing into glowing shards that reformed slower, steaming from geothermal vents below. They sealed a minor breach nearby—a swirling vortex sucking in ice chunks, spawning frost-laced abominations with claws like glacial spears. Terry's plasma lattice wove a grid across it, Elara's vines plugging the edges, Lirael's gales compressing the tear until it collapsed with a vacuum whoosh, expelling a final spray of shards. Cost mounted: Elara's leg wound wept blood, slowing her stride; Lirael's migraine left her vision spotting; Terry's emitter sparked, overheated from the strain. Trust frayed further, accusations unspoken but etched in glares and clipped commands. Spatial distortions rippled then—warps in the fabric folding the realm like parchment. The ice buckled, hurling them toward a convergence point: a yawning chasm where spires converged, fissures merging into a cauldron of steam and shadow. The leviathan regenerated behind, its roar shaking loose avalanches. Terry grabbed Elara's arm, pulling her from a crumpling ledge. Lirael leaped a fissure, wind aiding her arc. They tumbled into the chasm's maw, bonds tested as the ground swallowed them whole. But from the depths, a deeper tremor rose—not ice cracking, but something colossal stirring beneath.

Chapter 16: Frostfire Leviathan's Abyss

The chasm swallowed them whole, a jagged maw of fractured ice and obsidian veins that yawned wide beneath the crumbling leviathan's husk. Terry's boots skidded across a sheer wall of

hoarfrost as gravity yanked him downward, the air thickening with the acrid tang of ozone and scorched sugar. Elara's vines lashed out instinctively, coiling around a protruding crystal spur to arrest their fall, while Lirael's wind gusts buffeted them sideways, away from a cluster of razor-edged shards hurtling up from the depths like vengeful spears. "Brace—tendrils incoming!" Terry barked, his emitter humming in his gauntlet as he fired a plasma lance that seared through the gloom, vaporizing a writhing black appendage that snaked toward Elara's leg. The void tendril burst in a spray of oily ichor, splattering his visor and sizzling against the reinforced plating of his suit. The impact jolted his arm, numbing his fingers with a pins-and-needles throb that made his next shot waver. Elara grunted, her muscles straining as she hauled them along the vine line, thorns digging into the ice for purchase. "These walls are alive—feel that pulse? It's feeding off the shards." Her voice cut sharp, laced with the edge of someone weighing the risk of a longer drop against the certainty of being dragged into the black. From the abyss walls, crystalline shards erupted in a frenzy, blooming like malignant flowers before shearing free and tumbling toward them. One grazed Lirael's shoulder, tearing through her cloak and embedding in the meat of her deltoid with a wet crunch. She hissed, blood welling dark against the frost, and retaliated with a crackling surge of lightning that arced across the chasm, shattering a dozen shards into glittering dust that rained down like needle-sharp hail. The bolt's backlash singed her hair, leaving the scent of burnt keratin curling in the frigid air, and her arm hung limp for a heartbeat, every flex sending a fresh spike of agony through her nerves. They descended in fits and starts, Terry's kinetic shield flickering to life—a shimmering barrier of compressed air that deflected a geothermal blast erupting from a steaming fissure below. The superheated geyser slammed into the shield like a battering ram, hurling him backward against the wall; his ribs protested with a dull crack, each breath now a labored wheeze that fogged his mask. "Keep low—Elara, bind that cluster on the left. Lirael, clear the path ahead." Elara nodded once, her jaw set in a line that spoke of unspoken doubts about Terry's relentless push. She extended her hands, palms blooming with verdant energy as thorny vines whipped out, ensnaring a bulging mass of shards before they could coalesce into a larger threat. The tendrils

from the walls responded in kind, surging upward in undulating waves—oily black ropes veined with pulsating crimson, lashing at the vines with barbs that tore through plant and stone alike. One tendril coiled around her ankle mid-descent, yanking her downward with bone-jarring force. She twisted, firing an arrow from her enchanted bow that pierced the appendage, injecting a corrosive sap that made it convulse and release her in a frothing spasm. The sudden drop twisted her knee, a sharp pop echoing in her joint as she bit back a curse. Hallucinations clawed at their edges now, born from the riftblight's insidious seep. Terry glimpsed phantom insects swarming his visor, their chitinous legs scraping audibly before he shook his head and blasted them with a point-blank plasma burst—only for the "insects" to dissolve into swirling snowflakes, leaving his ears ringing from the overpressure. "Illusions—don't waste energy on ghosts," he snapped, though his voice cracked with the strain of ignoring the phantom itch crawling up his spine. Lirael, rappelling on a gust of wind, faltered as a spectral hound materialized mid-air, jaws unhinging to snap at her thigh. Her lightning fork missed, scorching the ice instead, and the illusion solidified just enough to rake claws across her calf, drawing real blood that froze in crimson rivulets. "They're blending—real and false. Terry, your grid could filter them out." Her tone held a tactical bite, implying his tech obsession might finally prove useful if he didn't charge ahead blindly. The pulsating core beacon loomed below, embedded in the chasm's throat like a throbbing heart of corrupted crystal, its surface etched with syndicate runes that glowed with stolen multiversal light. Geothermal vents ringed it, belching plumes of scalding vapor that warped the air and melted nearby ice into treacherous slush. Void tendrils converged on it, thickening the air into a writhing barrier, while shards rained ceaselessly, one embedding in Terry's thigh guard with enough force to dent the alloy and bruise the muscle beneath, forcing him to favor his good leg as he dropped the last ten meters. They hit the slick platform around the beacon in a tangle of limbs and magic. Elara rolled to her feet first, vines exploding outward to pin a trio of tendrils against the walls, their barbs scraping furrows into her protective bracers. Lirael landed hard, her injured shoulder absorbing the impact; she gasped, the jolt radiating up her neck and leaving her vision spotting with black flecks. Terry activated his

plasma grid—a lattice of superheated energy beams that sliced through the encroaching waves, cauterizing tendrils into charred husks that plummeted smoking into the depths. The grid's hum drowned out the chasm's groans, but a shard ricocheted off it, clipping his elbow and sending a jolt of nerve fire down his arm that made his emitter stutter. "Overload it—now!" Terry roared, interfacing his gauntlet with the beacon's rune-etched surface. Data streams flooded his HUD, schematics of the syndicate's engine flickering amid warnings of instability. Elara channeled her elixirs into the vines, thickening them into iron-hard cables that wrapped the core, thorns piercing its crystalline shell and pumping herbal acids that bubbled corrosively. Lirael summoned a tempest, bolts of lightning chaining from her fingertips to the beacon, each strike hammering it like a forge mallet, cracking the outer layer and exposing throbbing veins of riftblight. The overload built in a crescendo of physical fury: the beacon shuddered, runes fracturing with explosive pops that showered them in razor flecks. Tendrils recoiled, slamming against the walls and dislodging boulders that tumbled past, one grazing Elara's side and compressing her torso enough to squeeze the air from her lungs in a ragged exhale. The frostfire leviathan's regenerating form—hitherto a distant rumble—erupted in response, its colossal bulk heaving upward from the abyss, scales of ice and flame knitting back together only to shatter under the beacon's demise. Chunks of its flesh rained down, one massive slab crashing near Lirael and burying her leg under pulverized ice; she clawed free with a wind shove, but the cold seeped into her bones, turning her movements sluggish and her breaths shallow. Backlash hit like a seismic hammer. The beacon detonated in a bloom of plasma and storm, the shockwave hurling Terry face-first into the slush, his nose crunching against a crystal outcrop and flooding his mouth with the copper tang of blood. Elara's vines snapped under the strain, whipping back to lash her across the cheek, splitting skin and leaving a welt that burned with every gust. Lirael's tempest rebounded, a rogue bolt grounding through her body and seizing her muscles in convulsive spasms that left her curled on the ground, tasting bile. From the depths, the colossal abyssal entity stirred—a titanic silhouette of writhing shadows and crystalline armor, its emergence cracking the chasm floor and spawning emergency rifts that spewed spectral assaults. Ghostly

warriors, echoes of Sundering horrors, solidified mid-leap, blades of solidified hallucination swinging in arcs that bit deep. One cleaved toward Terry; he rolled aside, the strike gouging his shield and sending vibrations up his arm that loosened his grip on the emitter. “Seal those rifts—vines on the edges, lightning to bridge them!” Elara commanded through gritted teeth, her fingers—white-knuckled on her bow—betraying the tactical urgency beneath her calm. She loosed entangling roots into the nearest tear, thorns plugging the oily seep while Lirael, shaking off the spasms, hurled gales that fused the edges with crackling fusion, each seal popping like overripe fruit and releasing bursts of steam that scalded their exposed skin. Spectral blades rained down amid the chaos, one glancing off Lirael’s ribs and cracking bone with a sickening snap that made her double over, clutching her side as breaths came in shallow, pained hitches. Terry’s plasma lances pierced a phantom’s core, exploding it into harmless motes, but another tendril from the entity coiled around his waist, squeezing until his vision tunneled and ribs ground audibly. He fired point-blank, the blast scorching his own suit and blistering flesh beneath, but the tendril withered, dropping him to his knees in the slush. As the entity fully ascended—its immense bulk blotting the bruised sky—a chime pierced the din from Terry’s data slate, dislodged and skittering across the ice. The holographic log flickered to life unbidden, projecting the armored leader’s silhouette amid converging nexus lines, his voice a distorted echo: “The engine awakens—join me in the heart, or perish in the shards.” Elara snatched the slate, her grip vise-tight as rift winds howled, pulling them inexorably toward the entity’s gaping maw. Terry staggered up, emitter reigniting with a defiant whine, and fired a probing lance into the darkness below.

The lance streaked into the void like a comet’s tail, its superheated tip carving a fleeting path through the gloom. It struck something solid—a resonant thrum echoed back, vibrating the chasm walls and dislodging cascades of jagged ice that plummeted like spears. Amid the debris, a rhythmic pulse ignited far below: veins of frostfire weaving into a colossal obelisk, its crystalline facets throbbing with oily black ichor that fed the regenerating leviathan’s shattered bulk. “There—the core bea-

con," Terry bellowed, his voice slicing through the howl of rift winds as he clamped one hand over a fresh blister on his ribs, the raw skin pulling taut with each breath. He thrust his emitter forward, projecting a kinetic barrier that shimmered into existence, deflecting a volley of crystalline shards that exploded against it in sprays of razor confetti. Elara's eyes narrowed at the obelisk's glow, her jaw clenching in a firm line as she nocked another arrow fused with thorned roots. "Overload it from the flanks—I'll bind the veins first, or it'll just knit back stronger." Her words came clipped, a tactical pivot revealed in the way she angled her bow low, prioritizing containment over raw power, even as spectral warriors lunged from fresh breaches dotting the walls. Lirael, still hunched from the cracked rib, spat a glob of blood-tinged frost and straightened with a grimace, her fingers flexing to summon a crackling corona around her palms. "Flanks expose us to those tendrils—hit it dead center, or we're bait for the whole horde." She whipped her arm out, unleashing a bolt of raw electricity that arced across the chasm, fusing a cluster of emerging void tendrils into brittle husks that crumbled into the depths. The trio rappelled downward along the sheer walls, emitters and weaves anchoring them against the pull of howling updrafts laced with geothermal fury. Blasts of superheated steam erupted from fissures, singeing Elara's cloak and forcing her to twist mid-descent, roots lashing out to snare a protruding ledge for leverage. Terry's shield flickered under the onslaught, absorbing a barrage of shards that hammered it like hail on tin, each impact jarring his shoulders until sweat beaded on his brow despite the chill. From the walls, void tendrils surged in undulating waves, thick as cables and tipped with barbs that wept corrosive slime. One whipped toward Lirael, coiling around her ankle; she countered with a surge of lightning that traveled the length like a fuse, exploding the appendage in a shower of acrid vapor that burned her skin and left welts rising in angry red lines. "Keep descending—don't let them pin us!" she growled, her free hand clawing at the wall for purchase as she kicked free, the motion sending pebbles skittering into the abyss. Crystalline shards followed, birthing from the walls in explosive blooms—jagged clusters that detached and hurtled like shrapnel. Terry wove a plasma grid mid-air, the lattice igniting in a web of searing blue lines that intercepted the barrage, vaporizing chunks into

molten droplets that sizzled on the ice below. But the grid's glow drew hallucinations: the air thickened with phantom scents of charred flesh and ozone, making Elara's stomach lurch as visions overlaid her sight—tendrils morphing into writhing serpents that lunged with illusory fangs. She shook it off with a sharp inhale, loosing vines that pierced the real threats, thorns embedding deep and yanking shards aside before they could shred her harness. Geothermal blasts intensified as they neared the beacon's base, geysers of scalding vapor bursting from cracks that widened under the entity's stirrings. One plume scorched Terry's leg, the heat searing through his suit and blistering calf muscle; he bit back a hiss, redirecting a plasma lance to cauterize the fissure's edge, the superheated beam sealing it with a sizzle of quenching steam. "Almost there—Elara, roots on the pedestal; Lirael, bridge the surges to it!" The obelisk loomed now, a towering spire of interwoven frostfire and corruption veins, its pulse syncing with the leviathan's reforming shards that knitted overhead like a grotesque canopy. Spectral assaults multiplied, ghostly warriors materializing from emergency breaches that split the air with wet tears—echoes clad in rusted armor, their blades manifesting as solidified mirages that cleaved stone and flesh alike. One phantom swung at Elara during her descent; she dodged by swinging wide on her vine line, the blade whistling past to embed in the wall and spray shards that nicked her arm, drawing thin lines of blood that froze mid-drip. They hit the chasm floor in a controlled skid, boots thudding over frost-crusted ichor. The beacon's pedestal buzzed at the center, runes flickering with unstable energy that fed the leviathan's regeneration—limbs of crystalline ice and black oil reforming in grotesque layers above. Tendrils lashed from its base, probing like blind worms; Lirael met the first with a tempest gale, winds howling to shred it into fibrous tatters that whipped back in the gale, lacerating her face with stinging cuts. "Binding now!" Elara declared, her stance widening as she drove her bow into the ground, roots erupting in a thorny lattice that snaked across the pedestal. The vines clamped around the obelisk's veins, thorns puncturing the pulsating black ooze and constricting with creaking force, halting the flow in spurts of pressurized spray that coated her boots in sticky residue. She glanced sidelong at Terry, her shoulders rolling in a subtle adjustment that signaled approval of his grid setup, even as a spectral

blade grazed her shoulder, tearing cloth and drawing a shallow gash. Terry synced his emitter to the lattice, fingers flying over runic interfaces to amplify the plasma flow. “Channeling—on my mark!” The grid expanded, blue veins of energy threading through Elara’s roots, superheating the bindings until the veins boiled and cracked, fissures spiderwebbing the obelisk’s facets. Lirael positioned herself at the flanks, palms raised to summon a torrent of lightning that leaped from her hands in branching forks, arcing into the grid and the beacon’s core. “Mark!” she echoed, her voice steady despite the way her cracked rib protested with each heaving breath, a brief nod toward Elara underscoring her buy-in to the encirclement despite earlier doubts. The overload ignited in a chain reaction: plasma surged through the vines, lightning fusing the circuits into a blazing nexus. The obelisk quivered, crystals fracturing with explosive reports that reverberated like thunderclaps, shards raining down to crater the floor and force the trio to dive behind improvised barriers of frozen debris. The leviathan’s form convulsed overhead, its regenerating bulk shattering in cascades of ice and oil—limbs dissolving into harmless sludge that pattered like foul rain, the frostfire dimming to embers. But the backlash ripped through the chasm like a seismic cough. The pedestal buckled, spawning a ring of emergency breaches that belched spectral warriors in droves—ghostly ranks charging with blades that buzzed with solidified illusion, their strikes carving furrows in the ice and sending vibrations that buckled knees. One breach’s edge spewed a geothermal blast that hurled Lirael sideways, slamming her into a wall where the impact jarred her rib anew, pain knifing through her side as she coughed up flecks of frost. Worse, the depths heaved, the colossal abyssal entity fully rousing from its stirrings—a hulking behemoth of writhing shadows encased in crystalline plating, its maw a yawning vortex ringed with barbs that dripped molten corruption. Tentacles thicker than tree trunks erupted from the floor, coiling to smash at the group; Terry rolled under one, the appendage pulverizing stone where he’d stood, debris pelting his back like gravel. “Seal the breaches—prioritize the entity’s anchor points!” Terry ordered, emitter whining as he fired lances into the nearest tear, the plasma welding its edges with searing precision. A spectral warrior lunged at him mid-shot, blade biting into his shield and sending a jolt up his arm that numbed

fingers; he countered with a point-blank grid burst, the explosion vaporizing the phantom into dissipating wisps that stung his eyes like smoke. Elara wove through the chaos, roots thrusting from her boots to plug a breach's oily seep, thorns matting the tear shut even as a tentacle grazed her side, ripping a gash that wept blood onto the frost. She pressed on, her free hand clenching her bowstring in a white-knuckled grip that spoke to the strategy's razor edge—bind fast, or the seals would burst under the entity's thrashings. Lirael, staggering from the wall, bridged another breach with a lightning arc that fused its lips, the crackle drowning out her labored grunts. A spectral blade caught her thigh on the follow-through, slicing deep enough to buckle her leg; she dropped to one knee, gales whipping from her palms to repel the next wave, her gritted teeth flashing in a grimace that betrayed no surrender to the mounting toll. Injuries piled like the debris: Terry's blisters wept serum, Elara's gashes throbbed with each heartbeat, Lirael's rib and thigh screamed in protest. The entity thundered—a physical roar that shook the air and cracked more breaches—its tentacles sweeping in wide arcs that cratered the ground and forced evasive leaps. One appendage snagged Elara's vine line, yanking her toward the maw; she severed it with a thorned arrow, the backlash whipping her back to solid ice with bruising force. As the seals held tenuously, the data slate chimed again in Elara's grasp, its hologram stabilizing amid the din. The armored leader's form sharpened, nexus lines converging behind him like a web of fate. "The heart pulses—converge now, or the shards claim all." The projection warped, rift winds tugging at the trio's forms, drawing them toward a widening gateway at the entity's base, crystalline armor grinding as it lumbered forward. Terry lunged for the slate, emitter locking onto a fresh tentacle that quested toward them, plasma igniting in a defiant arc.

The plasma lance erupted from Terry's emitter like a spear of molten fury, piercing through the questing tentacle with a sizzle that vaporized sinew and crystal alike. Ichor sprayed in a foul arc, splattering the glacier with blackened sludge that sizzled and bubbled, releasing that acrid tang of ozone laced with charred sweetness. The appendage thrashed once, cratering the ground in a spray of rime shards, before retracting into the entity's towering bulk. But the victory tasted like ash— the breach winds

screamed stronger now, yanking at their limbs with invisible claws, dragging the trio toward the gaping chasm at the brute's base. Terry twisted mid-air, soles scraping glacier as he fired his thrusters to arrest the slide. Elara's creepers lashed out from her gauntlets, anchoring into a protruding spur of crystal on the flank; she hauled herself upright, but the pull jerked her shoulder with a crack that made her jaw clench. Lirael, thigh wound seeping crimson trails, conjured a gale from her palms to counter the suction—gales battering against the void's grip, buying them seconds. "Down there," Terry bellowed, emitter probing the abyss's depths where a faint pulse glowed amid churning gloom. "Beacon's core—overload it, or we're fodder." He gauged the drop: leap now and risk the whips below, or climb the flank and face the entity's sweeping limbs. The flank's splits promised handholds, but a fresh geothermal spring belched vapor nearby, blistering the atmosphere. No choice—direct descent meant hitting the beacon faster, even if it exposed their sides. They plunged together, Elara's roots coiling around Terry's waist for a makeshift harness, Lirael's gales propelling them like a faltering parachute. The chasm flanks erupted in turmoil. Void whips— slick, pulsating ropes of oily black laced with luminous splits— cracked from crevices, their tips flowering into barbed hooks that grated rock with wet, grinding rasps. One snagged Lirael's boot, yanking her downward; she retaliated with a fork of lightning that leaped along its length, charring the surface to brittle char that flaked away in acrid puffs. The reek thickened, burnt-sugar stench clinging to their throats like a vile syrup. Crystalline shards followed, bursting from the flanks in serrated volleys— needle-sharp projectiles that buzzed with inner rimefire, burrowing in the glacier with cracks like breaking bone. Terry raised his kinetic shield, the bulwark shimmering as it repelled a knot; collisions rippled through the field, deadening his arm to the elbow. He twisted, gauging a plasma lattice to clear the route—wide dispersal could atomize the shards but drain his reserves, leaving him exposed for the beacon. Instead, he chose precision: dual bolts pierced out, fusing a trio of incoming barbs into molten droplets that cascaded down, sizzling against the chill. Elara dodged left, a whip grazing her arm and leaving a welt that bubbled with taint, sinew knitting unnaturally with flecks of dark crystal. She thrust her bow forward, unleashing a barbed arrow that burrowed into

the flank's seep, creepers exploding outward to entangle a knot of shards mid-burst. The creepers twisted, pulverizing the crystals with snaps like splintering wood, but the strain tore at her laceration, crimson mixing with oily residue that burned like acid. "Flank right—creepers can't hold forever," she grunted, emerald gaze flicking to Terry's emitter readout. Her pressing aim burned clear: reach the beacon's pulse before the flanks fully birthed the horde, or the descent turned to burial. Delirious voids flickered at the edges—pockets where the atmosphere rippled, spawning mirages that raked at the senses. Phantom insects with wings of fractured glacier swarmed their sight, buzzing delusions that solidified into slashing jaws. One clamped onto Terry's shoulder, its bite piercing his coat with a chill that infiltrated sinew; he swatted it away, emitter buzzing as he blasted the apparition, the burst shattering it into harmless motes that dusted his hair like frozen ash. Lirael fared worse—a spectral hound manifested before her, jaws dislocating in a silent roar; she gauged a full maelstrom to disperse the horde, but the gales might destabilize their fall. Hazard too high. She channeled a swell into her palms instead, electricity leaping to ground the delusion in a web of sparks that fizzled it out, though the burden buckled her wounded leg further, compelling her to lean into Elara's line. Geothermal blasts punctuated the descent, fountains of superheated slurry erupting from splits, flash-melting glacier into steaming pools that sloshed below. One jet caught Terry's leg, blistering skin through his suit; he gritted his teeth, recalibrating his emitter to vent heat—tangible relief as coolant sizzled, but the delay let a whip crack close, compelling Elara to sever it with a root spear that embedded deep, wrenching the flank's taint free in a spurt of thick slime. They hit the chasm base in a controlled crash, knees buckling on a shelf glossy with frosttaint—ground warped here, rock contorting into meaty crests studded with steel tumors that throbbed wetly. The core beacon towered at the center: a pulsating obelisk of distorted crystal and rusted pipes, rift corruption threading its face like infected arteries, crackling with ozone that made the atmosphere taste metallic. The leviathan's shape hovered above, regenerating in spasms—appendages mending from ichor pools, rimefire eyes glaring down. "Surround it," Terry commanded, emitter charging for the overload. He circled left, shield raised against probing whips, calculating the angle:

direct plasma feed into the pipes could chain-react, but a misfire might broaden the chasm. Elara moved right, creepers probing the base for weak points—roots seeking the pipes' throb, her digits quivering slightly as she nocked another arrow, the bodily toll evident in her labored gasps. Lirael held the rear, gales ready to repel reinforcements, her thigh wound compelling a limp that slowed her twist; she eyed the obelisk's height, gauging a climb to strike from above against the hazard of exposure. They struck as one. Terry's plasma lattice enveloped the base, superheated arcs fusing pipes with molten glows, metal warping and dripping in luminous rivulets that pooled and sizzled. Elara's creepers swelled upward, barbs skewering pipes to infuse corrosive resin that bubbled the taint, dark fluid ejecting in foul spurts that reeked of scorched sweets. Lirael's lightning torrent crowned it, forks leaping across the obelisk in a deafening crackle, splintering crystal facets into grapeshot that battered the shelf. The beacon quivered with a thunderous groan, the structure splintering in an avalanche of bursts—hollows blooming at its feet, shockwaves flinging the trio back against the flank. The leviathan above shrieked, a bodily bellow that quivered their bones, its regenerating shape disintegrating into titanic fragments that plummeted like meteors, crashing into the chasm sides and broadening fissures. But the rebound ripped deeper: the base buckled, unveiling the abyss's true horror. A titanic abyssal horror stirred from the depths—enormous, its pelt a patchwork of shielded slabs fused with coiling pipes, jaws gaping wide enough to swallow light. Talons like scythes raked upward, gouging rock in bursts of rubble, the atmosphere filling with its guttural rumble and the reek of ancient rot mingled with rift corruption's signature scorch. Emergency wounds tore open in the horror's wake—gaping splits in reality ejecting spectral fighters, their blades solidifying from fog into edged steel that clanged against glacier. Injuries mounted: Terry's blisters split under the blaze, serum mixing with sweat; Elara's laceration oozed taint-tainted crimson, her creepers drooping at the borders; Lirael's thigh folded fully, compelling her to one knee as agony knifed through her flank. A spectral blade whistled past Terry's ear, nicking his cheek; he countered with a bolt that detonated the assaulter in a burst of cinders, the collision scorching his glove. "Seal them—now!" Terry thundered, emitter locking onto

the nearest wound. He gauged a full lattice, but the horror's talons loomed, threatening to pulverize them flat. Precision seals: creeper-bind the lips, lightning-fuse the borders, plasma seal the nucleus. Elara lunged forward despite the throb in her flank, roots thrusting into a wound's oily jaws, barbs matting it shut with fibrous plugs that strained against the drag. Lirael, grunting through clenched teeth, bridged another with a leap that welded its borders, the fusion sparking wildly but enduring—barely. Her spare palm clamped her thigh, knuckles blanching, as she probed for the next threat. Delirious assaults bombarded them, not whispers, but bodily onslaughts—vivid scents of smoke choking the atmosphere where none burned, compelling Reyes to rake at his throat, hacking as phantom cinders seared his lungs. Elara reeled, seeing creepers twist into serpents coiled around her staff, delusion so solid she slashed at them, barbs drawing real crimson from her palms. Lirael staggered, knees folding under a wave of sickness twisting her belly, ground seeming to lurch like a living thing, screams reverberating from nowhere mimicking fallen squad mates to draw her fire wide. Seismic shudders rocked the expanse, splits gaping to belch vapor that blistered bare flesh. A titanic talon—sibling to the volcanic one, sheathed in glacial shielding—burst from a central wound, whips of ichor-laced glacier cracking out, evoking fresh hordes from the depths, pulverizing a pinnacle in its grasp, rubble cascading down in slabs that boomed into the powder. Terry pulled back from the console, data secured, determination hardening his stance, eyeing the talon's hinges pulsating with taint. "Bind it low!" he snapped, layering plasma over Elara's creepers, extending them, creepers wrapping the base, barbs that sank deep drawing rivers of molten ichor that hardened into restraints. Lirael channeled her maelstrom, lightning leaping in chains that crawled across the whips, disrupting the regenerative throbs, bursts of superheated vapor. Kael's team took positions in a shoot line, salvos tearing into the horde. One slug nicked a whip, lopping it off with a splatter of thick slime that scorched a fighter's footwear, eliciting a sharp oath while he ground it away. The chamber constricted amid attack, flanks creaking as quakes escalated, knocking slabs from overhead that crashed in crushing booms. Terry's shoulder ached from the collision, sight fuzzing for an instant. Terry bellowed over the turmoil, its tip nicking his cheek

and leaving a burning mark that oozed taint. “Rip apart multiversal wounds—militarize the corruption.” He raised a ritual orb and the tunnel floor split wide, birthing a titanic horror, multi-limbed, its body a writhing mass of chitin and dark crystal, tentacles flailing with barbs that gouged furrows in the rock. The brute’s roar shook the atmosphere, a guttural bellow that pressed against eardrums like tangible force, the ground quaking under its emerging bulk. Terry lunged forward, gauntlet blazing as he fired a plasma lance straight into a limb’s joint, the superheated beam sizzling through sinew and severing tendon with a spray of boiling ichor. He bellowed an order. One assailant in exosuit armor reeled back, he crumpled with a groan, an incoming whip whir of failing hydraulics. The first wave crashed like a tide, muffled screams reverberated, the collision dislodging dust, ethereal ichor, their clicks reverberating, burnt-sugar stench, buzzed faintly. An enforcer’s whip, the air grew dense, projection hammer, the breach’s howl swelling to a deafening roar. Titanic horror, brute, projection inbound, solid projections manifested, unleashing arrows, the brute toppled, projection guardians forged ahead, the group charged onward, corruption, bellowed, maelstrom, intensified the assault, vein of corruption, reverberated, the titanic horror bellowed, the breach dilated, corruption veins, like an accusation, probe for weakness, conjuring a gentle breeze to urge them onward. The first gush erupted moments later, bombarding the barrier with eating acid that twisted its borders, her fingers knotting in a weave that thrust roots up from the ground, skewering the pseudopod and hauling it down into the fissure with a fleshy rip, metallic tang of unshed blood, eyes bulging as he flailed at phantoms, he crumpled to one knee, vomiting as sickness folded him, legs giving way on the jagged rock, conjuring a gale that knocked him straight without contact, dispersing the phantom horde like fog. “Shake it off—battle the tangible!” Her voice sliced keen, her free hand quivered, revealing the burden of dual effort, inched on bellies across pulsating veins that trembled beneath them, sizzling in defiance. The parallel chewed, a twist in his belly, but he buried it; hubris could pause, endurance wouldn’t. He eyed the left flank’s overhang—shelter, yet prone to shatter from plasma reflux—or bare the middle for an open strike, gambling on a rush. Hazard the middle; pressing aim: scour the route swiftly, firing piercing superheated plasma

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The squad's volleys hammered on, rounds punching through ethereal flanks with wet thuds that sprayed luminescent ichor across the frost-slicked floor. Terry's emitter buzzed in his grip, its plasma lattice flickering as he swept it wide, carving glowing arcs that bisected a cluster of charging projections. One ghosted warrior lunged, its blade a solidified shimmer of fractured light, but Elara's vines lashed out first—thick cords bursting from the ground with a fibrous snap, coiling around the figure's legs and yanking it off balance. The projection snarled, its form rippling like oil on water, before Lirael's gale hurled it into a jagged ice wall, where it shattered into harmless motes. "Flank left—now!" Terry bellowed, his voice slicing through the din of cracking ice and sizzling energy. He twisted, emitter raised, but a whip from the churning breach coiled toward him, its tip barbed with crystalline hooks that rasped against his shield. The impact jolted his shoulders, sending vibrations up his arms that

made his fingers tingle numbly. Elara glanced at him mid-stride, her brow furrowing as she nocked another arrow tipped with thorny barbs. “Your grids are thinning the horde, but they’re reforming faster—push the breach, not the edges.” Her words came sharp, laced with the strain of drawing her bow, her free hand gesturing to the throbbing anomaly at the chamber’s heart. Lirael nodded once, her staff whipping up a vortex that sucked in stray shards, grinding them to powder with howling winds. She spared a quick look at Elara, lips pressing thin. “Agreed. Contain the core, or we’ll be chasing shadows till the ice swallows us.” Reyes, the squad’s grizzled point man, grunted from his knee, rifle braced as he squeezed off bursts that pulped a whip mid-swing. His boot scraped back against the scorching slime residue, grinding it into oblivion with deliberate twists. “Voss had the right of it earlier—bottleneck ‘em here.” He jerked his chin toward the narrowing archway leading deeper, his stance widening to cover Terry’s advance. The air thickened with the acrid bite of ionized frost, mingling with the faint, cloying sweetness of corruption’s burn. Terry’s ribs ached from that earlier bruise, each twist pulling a fresh stab that fogged his vision at the edges. He ignored it, channeling mana through his emitter; the device whirred, birthing bolts of superheated plasma that streaked toward the breach. They struck true, exploding in blooms of azure fire that vaporized tendrils and sent shockwaves rippling outward, buckling sections of the cavern wall. But the anomaly throbbed defiantly, spawning more—void tendrils slithering like living cables, tipped with shards that gleamed hungrily. One snagged Reyes’ armguard, yanking him sideways; he roared, slamming his rifle butt down to sever it, the blade-edge bayonet shearing through with a spray of viscous fluid that sizzled on his sleeve. The force spun him half-around, his shoulder clipping a protruding ice spur that gashed his cheek, blood welling hot and immediate.”Keep firing—suppressive!” Terry ordered, dropping low as a geothermal vent erupted nearby, blasting steam that scalded his neck and filled the air with a hissing roar. The heat warped his shield, making it flicker erratically. Elara unleashed her arrow, the shaft burrowing into a tendril’s base before blooming into entangling roots that crushed it inward, pulping the mass with a series of wet crunches. Lirael surged forward, her stormweave coiling around her like a living shroud. She thrust

her staff, unleashing a torrent of lightning that forked across the horde, chaining from one projection to the next in crackling leaps. The bolts hammered home, charring ethereal flesh and grounding out in explosive pops that deafened the squad momentarily, leaving ears ringing with a persistent whine. One strike grazed a crystalline scuttler clambering from the breach's rim, hurling it backward to skid across the floor, its legs twitching spasmodically before stilling. The ground trembled then, a deep rumble building from below like the growl of some buried brute. Cracks spiderwebbed outward from the anomaly, frostfire veins glowing brighter as the leviathan's fractured form stirred in the depths. Terry's data slate vibrated in his pocket, its alert piercing the chaos—a holographic log demanding interface. "Not now," he muttered, but Elara shot him a hard stare, her vines retracting with a slithering retreat as she covered his flank. "Interface it—might give us an edge on that thing below." She unleashed another volley, her arrows embedding in a swarm of shards that detonated in thorny bursts, shredding the air with fibrous whips. Terry yanked the slate free, thumbing it active mid-duck. The device projected a shimmering feed, holograms unfolding in mid-air: diagrams of throbbing nexuses, overlaid with logs from his father's research. A voice crackled through—distorted, urgent: "The armored one's pulling threads from the convergence. He's here, in the nexus pull. Weaponizing the corruption to bridge realms—" The words cut off as the chasm yawned wide. The floor gave way without warning, a massive fissure splitting the cavern in a deafening groan of rending ice and stone. Terry's boots skidded on the edge, the slate nearly slipping from his grasp. He lunged, emitter firing a desperate plasma grid that anchored to the lip, but the pull was inexorable—void tendrils erupting from the abyss walls, lashing like prehensile ropes to drag them down. Elara's hand clamped his wrist, her grip iron as vines shot from her cuffs, burrowing into the crumbling ledge for purchase. "Hold—Lirael, winds up!" But a shard clipped her side, the impact glancing off her leather guard yet driving the wind from her lungs, leaving her coughing against the sulfurous updraft rising from below. Lirael spun, her gale surging to buoy them, but the chasm's maw widened, swallowing Reyes and half the squad in a cascade of debris. Their shouts echoed briefly, cut short by the crunch of falling rock. The trio plummeted, the air

whipping past in a frozen howl, geothermal blasts erupting from side vents to singe exposed skin and fill nostrils with choking ash. Tendrils surged in waves, crystalline barbs glinting in the crimson glow from below. Terry twisted mid-fall, his plasma bolts spearing one cluster; they detonated in mid-air, the blasts shoving him sideways and scorching his sleeve with secondary heat that blistered his forearm. Agony knifed keen, but he gritted through, the emitter's recoil steadying his spin. Elara twisted like a leaf in the gale, her vines extending to snag protruding shards on the walls, slowing their descent with jerking halts that wrenched her shoulders. One tendril coiled her ankle, yanking viciously; she kicked free, the barbs raking a gouge down her calf that burned like acid, blood mixing with the oily corruption seeping from the wound. "These walls— they're alive," she hissed, her free hand weaving roots that punched into the rock, anchoring them briefly before another blast sheared the hold. Lirael's lightning arced wildly, surges forking to sever tendrils that whipped close. One bolt backlashed, the discharge grounding through her staff and into her palms, leaving them smoking and raw, nerves firing with pins-and-needles agony that made her fingers curl involuntarily. "The core beacon—it's down there, throbbing. Aim for it!" The abyss walls closed in, a pulsating core beacon throbbing at the nadir like a heart of fractured crystal, wreathed in frostfire. Geothermal geysers erupted sporadically, one plume engulfing a swath of tendrils in steam that boiled them away with sibilant pops, but the heat wave slammed into the group, the pressure wave battering Lirael's eardrums and leaving a muffled roar in her skull. They descended in a frenzy of motion—Terry's grids weaving barriers that deflected shards, exploding them into harmless gravel that pelted like hail. Elara's vines lashed out, entangling clusters to crush them against the walls with grinding snaps, while Lirael's surges lit the chasm in strobing blue, vaporizing barbs mid-strike. Hallucinations flickered at the edges: phantom insects swarming their vision, their buzz a maddening drone, but Terry shook his head clear, focusing on the beacon's glow. Injuries mounted. A shard grazed Terry's thigh, embedding shallowly before he blasted it free; the tear pulled taut with every kick, muscle seizing in protest. Elara took a tendril lash across her back, the barbs hooking fabric and flesh alike, ripping free with a force that bowled her into

the wall, her ribs compressing painfully against unyielding ice. Lirael dodged a geothermal burst, but the edge of it seared her boot sole, the melt forcing her to twist awkwardly and sprain her ankle on impact with a protruding ledge. They hit the beacon's chamber with a bone-jarring thud, rolling across a floor veined with corruption that pulsed underfoot like exposed nerves. The frostfire leviathan's form regenerated in grotesque fits—towering limbs reforming from ichor pools, crystalline armor knitting with audible cracks. "Overload it—now!" Terry roared, scrambling up, emitter charging to full. He slammed a plasma lattice into the beacon's base, the energy field buzzing as it interfaced, runes on the device glowing in sync. Elara rose beside him, vines surging forth to bind the leviathan's emerging limbs, thorns piercing joints with squelching punctures that halted its thrash. "Bind and burn—make it count." Her voice was steady, but her hand trembled slightly as she extended another coil, revealing the strain of her gashed calf. Lirael channeled her tempest, lightning pouring into the lattice in a unified surge. The beacon overloaded in a cataclysmic flare, energy feedback shattering the leviathan's core with a thunderous crack that hurled shards like shrapnel, one slicing Terry's cheek and drawing a warm trickle down his jaw. But the backlash ripped open the depths. A colossal abyssal entity uncoiled from below—an immense bulk of writhing tendrils and armored plates, its emergence shaking the chamber with seismic quakes that buckled the floor. Emergency breaches split the air, spewing spectral warriors that solidified mid-charge, blades raised. The trio sealed them desperately—plasma cauterizing edges, vines plugging the tears, lightning grounding the anomalies in explosive bursts. A spectral blade nicked Elara's arm, the cut shallow but venomous, swelling immediately and numbing her grip. Lirael's next surge recoiled, the force knocking her back to skid across gravel that abraded her elbows raw. As the entity stirred fully, maw gaping to exhale a gale of bitter vapor that frosted their breath, Terry's slate pinged again. The holographic log reignited, projecting the armored leader's silhouette amid converging nexuses—his form pulling strings of corruption, drawing them inexorably toward him. The air warped, a nexus pull yanking at their forms like an invisible tide. Tendrils from the entity lashed out, one coiling toward Lirael's leg.

Chapter 17: Abyssal Nexus Pull

Terry's gauntlet buzzed in his grip, its blue glow flickering against the chasm's jagged walls as the holographic nexus signal tugged at them like an invisible tether. The air thickened with the acrid tang of ozone, pulling their bodies downward in erratic jerks. Below, the titanic abyssal brute uncoiled from the depths, its form a writhing mass of obsidian flesh veined with pulsating crimson. Tentacles lashed out, each one thicker than a transport beam, tipped with clusters of razor-edged blades that gleamed like fractured obsidian. He twisted mid-fall, boots scraping against a protruding ledge to arrest his slide. Flee right toward that narrowing fissure, or pivot left and risk the open drop? The tentacle whipping closest aimed for Elara, its blades slicing the air with a whistle. No time—Terry slammed his thumb on the emitter's core, unleashing a lattice of superheated plasma. The beams crisscrossed like molten webs, slicing into the appendage with sizzling bursts. Flesh parted in charred segments, ichor spraying in arcs that hissed against the rock, but the stump quivered and began to knit, black tendrils weaving new tissue. Elara dropped to one knee, her fingers digging into the stone as she channeled through her gauntlets. Thorny vines erupted from fissures in the wall, coiling around the regenerating limb like iron cables overgrown with barbed spikes. They bit deep, pinning it against the chasm wall with a crunch of fracturing bone beneath the entity's hide. "Flank it low!" she barked, her voice cutting through the rumble, sweat beading on her brow as she strained to hold the weave. Lirael hovered nearby, wind currents buoying her form against the pull. She scanned the entity's core—a throbbing bulge of armored plates midway down its bulk. Blast the blades first to clear a path, or chain the core directly and chance the backlash? The risk was the spray; one wrong surge could electrify the ichor pooling below. She opted for precision, hurling a chain of lightning that forked from her palms. Bolts arced with crackling fury, slamming into the core's seams and prying them apart in showers of sparks. The entity convulsed, a bellow echoing up the chasm like grinding stone, but not before a tentacle grazed her shoulder. The blade's edge tore fabric and skin, sending her spinning into the wall. She hit with a thud that jarred her teeth, vision blurring as blood welled from a shallow

gash that burned like frostbite. The nexus signal intensified, yanking them deeper. Terry's stomach lurched as his feet left the ledge; he fired a kinetic shield from his emitter, the energy field blooming like a translucent dome to deflect an incoming swipe. The impact reverberated through his arms, numbing his fingers and hurling him sideways into a jutting spur of crystal. Pain knifed his hip where it connected, a deep bruise forming instantly, each step threatening to buckle his leg. He pushed off, eyes locking on a pulsating conduit embedded in the wall—a vein of the entity's own essence, glowing with the same holographic blue as the signal. "Conduit—it's our anchor!" Terry shouted, pointing with his free hand. Dodge the ichor pooling at the base, or leap over and expose his back? The spray from the severed tentacle bubbled corrosively, eating into the stone with fizzling pops. He vaulted it, landing with a roll that aggravated his hip, sending a jolt up his spine. Elara released her vines just enough to lash a fresh set toward the conduit, the thorns wrapping its length to stabilize their descent. Lirael followed, her wind gusts propelling her forward as she sealed the gash on her shoulder with a hasty herbal poultice from her belt—fingers trembling as she smeared the green paste, the sting making her grimace. The entity retaliated, its core pulsing brighter as hallucinatory swarms materialized from the shadows. Spectral minions—ghostly imps with needle-like limbs—swarmed like a fog of razors, their forms solidifying mid-leap to claw at exposed skin. One latched onto Elara's arm, its grip like icy pincers, drawing beads of blood before she shook it free with a vine whip that pulped it against the wall. Terry swung his emitter in a wide arc, plasma lances erupting in a fan that vaporized three in a burst of steam, the heat singeing his sleeve and blistering his forearm. The recoil bucked his shoulder, a sharp twinge that made him grit his teeth. Lirael unleashed a tempest, winds howling through the chasm to scatter the swarm. The gale tore at the minions, flinging them into the walls where they shattered like brittle glass, but the effort drained her; she staggered, clutching her side where a phantom slash had manifested as a real welt, ribs protesting with every inhale. "It's spawning faster—aim for the source!" The entity's core split wider under her earlier strike, expelling more of the illusions in waves. They reached the conduit, Terry jamming his emitter's interface prong into its surface. Data flooded his

visor—fragmented logs flickering like corrupted code. Schematics of a multiversal engine, twisted with overlays of his father's handwriting: fusion protocols for rift corruption veins into core matrices. The armored leader's voice echoed in the feed, distorted but clear: "Prince's designs will bind the realms—corruption as the new weave." Terry's jaw clenched, knuckles blanching on the device as he overrode the lock, amplifying the nexus pull. The conduit thrummed, yanking them toward a stabilizing rift at the chasm's nadir—a swirling vortex of fractured light. But the entity surged, tentacles regenerating into a frenzy. One coiled around Lirael's ankle mid-stride, blades nicking her calf and drawing a hiss of pain. She twisted, lightning chaining from her free hand to sear the grip; the tentacle recoiled in spasming coils, releasing her with a spray of ichor that splashed her boots, the acid eating through leather and blistering her skin in stinging welts. Elara bound two more limbs with vines, thorns piercing deep enough to anchor them, but the strain pulled at her own wounds—a gash on her thigh from an earlier minion reopening with fresh blood. Terry fired a final plasma lattice, beams intersecting to bisect a central tentacle. The severance unleashed a geyser of ichor that he dodged by inches, the droplets sizzling on his shield and forcing him to drop it, the sudden vulnerability making his pulse hammer. "Rift—now!" He grabbed Elara's arm, hauling her toward the vortex as Lirael limped behind, wind shoving them all forward. The entity roared, core fracturing under combined assaults—vines prying, lightning coring, plasma cauterizing. Seismic upheavals rocked the chasm, chunks of ceiling plummeting like boulders. One clipped Terry's shoulder on the way down, the blunt force driving him to his knees, breath exploding from his lungs in a wheeze as his collarbone throbbed with promised fracture. Elara shoved him upright, her own face ashen from a vine recoil that had wrenched her wrist. Lirael summoned a final gale, propelling them into the rift's maw. Space warped, the pull scattering them like shrapnel. Terry tumbled through void-streaked darkness, emerging with a jolt onto cold metal grating. The fortified sanctum stretched before him—walls lined with buzzing consoles and rift-sealed vaults, the armored leader silhouetted at a central dais, gauntleted hand raised to activate a barrier field. Reinforcements—exosuit enforcers with plasma rifles—poured from side hatches, boots clanging as they leveled

weapons. Elara landed nearby, rolling to her feet and drawing her bow in one fluid motion, an arrow nocked and glowing with verdant energy. Lirael crashed down last, skidding across the floor before pushing up, sparks dancing from her fingertips as she eyed the closing ranks. Terry rose, emitter charging with a whine, and lunged forward to disrupt the dais's glow.

Plasma bolts scorched the air as Terry's emitter spat a searing beam straight at the dais's core. The armored leader twisted at the last instant, the shot grazing his pauldron in a spray of molten sparks that hissed against the grating. He barked a command into his gauntlet, and the barrier field flickered to life—a shimmering dome of warped energy that rippled like heated oil, deflecting Elara's verdant arrow mid-flight. The projectile shattered against it, releasing a burst of thorny spores that pattered harmlessly, though one enforcer flinched as a spore lodged in his visor, vines sprouting to obscure his sight and forcing him to claw at it with armored fingers. Elara dropped into a crouch, her boots scraping metal as she loosed another arrow, this one trailing a whip of entangling roots that snaked toward the nearest enforcer. The roots latched onto his leg servos, grinding gears to a halt and yanking him off-balance. He toppled with a clang, rifle discharging wildly into the ceiling, where it punched craters that rained debris. Lirael flung her arms wide, summoning a whirlwind that howled through the chamber, whipping loose panels from the walls and slamming them into the advancing ranks. One panel struck an enforcer's helmet, the impact crumpling it inward and sending him staggering, blood trickling from a split lip as he groped for his comms. Terry didn't wait for the field to stabilize. He rolled behind a console bank, the metal scorching his palms from residual heat, and patched his emitter to the nearest terminal with a hasty rune-link. Sparks flew as his code infiltrated the system's defenses, the dais's glow stuttering. "Elara, flank left—pin those suits!" His voice cut sharp over the din, laced with the edge of command that brooked no debate. She nodded once, her jaw set, and vaulted over a fallen enforcer, landing with a twist that reopened the blister on her ankle from the ichor spray. Pain lanced up her leg, making her stagger a step, but she nocked an elixir-coated arrow—its tip bubbling with corrosive sap—and fired into the joint of another

exosuit. The armor buckled, acid eating through hydraulics in a fizzing plume that forced the occupant to eject, tumbling out with a yelp as the suit collapsed in a heap of twitching limbs. The leader snarled, his voice amplified through his helmet's grille. "Foolish whelp. Your father's legacy ends here—mine begins." He slammed a fist onto the dais, and the chamber shuddered. From vents along the walls, oily black veins erupted, Riftblight pulsing like living conduits. They snaked across the floor, crystallizing into jagged barbs that lashed out, one spearing toward Lirael. She leaped aside, the barb gouging her boot and sending her skidding into a bulkhead, the jolt jarring her elbow with a pop that left her arm hanging limp, every flex sending fire through her nerves. "Thorne—cover!" Terry yelled, his emitter whining as he overloaded the terminal. The barrier field collapsed in a cascade of static, but not before the leader activated a secondary protocol. The veins thickened, birthing hulking forms from the corruption—abyssal enforcers, their exosuits fused with pulsating flesh, tumors of metal sprouting like spines. These weren't mere soldiers; they regenerated, wounds knitting with wet slurps as ichor welled and hardened into armor. Lirael gritted her teeth, forcing her injured arm up to channel a bolt of electricity. It arced across the room, chaining from one vein to another, charring the corruption and making the nearest abomination convulse. Its chest plate melted, exposing writhing tendrils beneath, but they reformed almost instantly, the flesh bubbling back into shape with a stench of ozone and charred meat. The thing lumbered forward, swinging a limb that clipped her shoulder, the blow hurling her against a console. Sparks bit into her back, and she tasted blood, coughing as ribs protested with sharp stabs that shortened her breaths. Elara wove through the chaos, her movements a blur of green afterimages. She slammed a vial of growth elixir into the floor, and roots exploded upward in a tangle that ensnared two regenerating brutes. Thorns drove into their joints, pinning them as she drew her dagger—its blade etched with runes—and slashed at the veins feeding them. Black ichor gushed, but the roots strained, the abominations' strength pulling her off her feet. She held on, muscles burning, until Terry's plasma lance intersected the mass, superheating the corruption into brittle shards that shattered under the pressure. "Nice shot," Elara grunted, dropping free and rubbing her raw

palms, where sap had blistered the skin into raw patches. “Don’t get comfortable,” Terry shot back, his eyes flicking to the leader, who was interfacing with the dais again. The man was retreating toward a rear vault, enforcers forming a wedge to cover him. Terry charged his emitter for a grid burst, but a regenerating abomination intercepted, its claw raking across his thigh guard. The armor held, but the force buckled his knee, driving him down hard enough that his teeth clacked together, a copper tang flooding his mouth from a bitten tongue. Lirael pushed to her feet, wind gusting from her good hand to buffet the abomination back. It staggered, spines cracking against a wall, but regenerated mid-stumble, flesh knitting over fractures with grotesque speed. “These things won’t stay down—hit the veins, not the shells!” Her words came ragged, each one punctuated by a wince as she cradled her arm. The leader laughed, a metallic echo. “You think severance ends it? The blight evolves—adapts to your parlor tricks.” He triggered another surge, and the veins pulsed brighter, spawning hallucinatory swarms: phantom insects that buzzed with illusory stings, their bites manifesting as real welts that itched and burned like acid on exposed skin. Terry swatted at them, one latching onto his neck, the puncture sending a wave of nausea that cramped his gut, forcing him to double over and retch bile onto the grating. Elara shook off a cluster clinging to her sleeve, the stings raising hives that throbbed with heat, distracting her as she loosed a vine whip. It caught a clean vein, yanking it taut until it ruptured in a spray that corroded the floor into pitted craters. The connected abomination faltered, regeneration slowing to a crawl, its form sloughing off in globs. “There—keep at the sources!” Reinforcements poured in thicker now, boots thundering as they fanned out. One enforcer leveled his rifle at Terry, the shot grazing his emitter and sending feedback through his arm—a jolt that numbed his fingers, making the device slip from his grip. It clattered away, sparking, and he dove after it, a blade from a nearby brute whistling over his head to embed in the wall with a thunk. Lirael summoned a tempest, gales whipping the air into a frenzy that hurled an enforcer into his comrade, their suits colliding with a crunch of buckling plates. The impact dazed one, helmet cracking to reveal a bloodied face, but the hallucinatory insects swarmed her vision next—spectral hounds that lunged with snapping jaws. She felt teeth sink into

her calf, phantom or not, the pain buckling her leg and tearing a gasp from her throat as she collapsed, knee slamming into jagged metal that split skin to the bone. “Up, Thorne!” Elara hauled her upright, vines shielding them from a plasma volley that scorched the air inches away, the heat singeing Elara’s hair and drawing a hiss through clenched teeth. Together, they pressed forward, Elara’s arrows piercing vein clusters while Lirael’s lightning forked to cauterize the leaks. Terry reclaimed his emitter, the numbness fading to pins and needles, and fired a lattice that webbed across three abominations. The beams superheated their cores, bursting them in geysers of steam and ichor that scalded nearby enforcers, one screaming as blisters erupted across his face, forcing him to rip off his helmet and claw at the skin. The leader reached the vault, sealing it behind him with a hiss of hydraulics, but not before Terry glimpsed the chamber beyond—pulsing with rift energy, consoles displaying schematics of a multiversal engine, veins threading through like arteries. “He’s linking it— the engine to the blight!” Terry roared, blasting the door’s panel. It buckled, sparks flying, but held. Elara bound the remaining veins with a final elixir burst, roots coiling like pythons to crush the corruption. The last abomination dissolved, its regeneration choked, leaving only twitching remnants. Lirael leaned on her, breath hitching from the leg wound, blood soaking her pant leg in warm rivulets. Enforcers lay scattered—some groaning, suits venting smoke; others still, armor rent by thorns or charred by storms. Terry kicked aside a fallen rifle, its barrel still hot enough to blister his boot sole through the tread. He slammed his emitter against the vault door, runes glowing as he hacked the lock. The panel fried, mechanisms grinding open with a screech. Beyond, the leader stood at a throbbing console, hands weaving Nexus threads that pulled at the air, drawing rift distortions. But as the door parted, he whirled, gauntlet igniting with abyssal energy—a regenerating claw manifesting from the blight, larger than before, its edges reforming even as Terry raised his weapon. Elara nocked an arrow, Lirael sparked lightning despite her trembling arm, and the trio surged in, the clash renewing in the heart of the sanctum’s glow. The claw lashed out, forcing Terry to shield-dive, the impact reverberating through his bones like a hammer strike.

Elara twisted mid-stride, her bowstring humming as she loosed

a barbed shaft. It sank into the claw's regenerating flesh with a wet thunk, elixir-laced thorns blooming outward to burrow deeper. The appendage shuddered, black ichor bubbling from the wounds, but it recoiled only fractionally before whipping back, barbs raking the air where Lirael had stood a heartbeat prior. Lirael rolled aside, her wounded leg dragging a smear of blood across the grated floor. She thrust her palm forward, unleashing a jagged bolt that arced across the chamber. The electricity hammered the claw's joint, fusing segments of crystalline armor into molten slag that dripped in sizzling globs, scorching pits into the metal deck. "Flank it low—don't let it anchor!" she barked, her free hand gripping Elara's shoulder for leverage, eyes flicking to Terry with a nod that urged tighter coordination. Terry shook off the shield's reverberation, bones thrumming with residual force. He pivoted, emitter whining as it charged. The leader sneered from behind the console, his gauntlet pulsing with stolen rift energy, feeding the abomination's growth. Veins snaked from the floor, thickening the claw into a full limb—hulking now, tipped with serrated flanges that ground against the walls, carving furrows of sparking stone. The air warped. A holographic flicker ignited mid-chamber, the nexus signal from the earlier message materializing as a spectral tether. It latched onto Terry's chest like an invisible hook, yanking him forward with inexorable force. "What the—?" He staggered, plasma emitter dipping as the pull intensified, dragging Elara and Lirael in its wake. The leader's weave had twisted the signal into a conduit, hauling them toward him even as the claw surged. Elara planted her boots, roots erupting from her soles to grip the floor, but the tether tore them free. "It's syncing us to the core—fight the drag!" Her fingers flexed around her bow, a gesture of defiance as she scanned the emerging fissures. The sanctum buckled. The claw's thrash split the deck, and the nexus pull hurled them into the breach—a yawning chasm beneath, veins of corruption threading its walls like exposed nerves. They plummeted, the holographic line whipping them through sulfurous gusts and sprays of caustic mist. Terry's stomach lurched; he fired a kinetic burst upward, the recoil shoving him against the tether's strain. It stabilized their fall into a controlled slide down slick, pulsating conduits. Deeper in the chasm's depths, the abyssal entity uncoiled fully. Writhing tentacles lashed from shadowy recesses, each as thick

as a pillar, lined with razor-edged blades that hummed with rift vibrations. One tendril coiled toward Lirael, its tip blooming into a maw of crystalline teeth. She unleashed a chain of lightning, the torrent crackling as it sheared the edge clean off. Shards exploded outward, pelting the walls and embedding in Terry's shield with pinging impacts that dented the energy field. "Target the bases—sever the roots!" Elara called, her voice steady amid the roar. She nocked another arrow, this one trailing a vine whip that lashed out, coiling around a tentacle's base. The growth tightened, thorns puncturing deep, drawing a gush of oily fluid that splashed across her arm, raising welts on her skin. She winced but held, muscles straining as the appendage bucked. Terry complied, emitter locking onto the entangled limb. He unleashed a plasma lattice—a web of searing beams that sliced through the tentacle like a plasma torch through cable. The severed end flailed wildly, blades carving gouges in the chasm wall before it slumped, ichor pooling below in a steaming lake that etched the stone. The entity bellowed, a subsonic rumble that shook loose boulders, one clipping Elara's shoulder and drawing a sharp intake of breath from her. But regeneration surged. Stumps bubbled, flesh knitting with metallic spurs. From the wounds spawned hallucinatory swarms—spectral minions flickering into solidity, insectoid forms with chitinous wings that buzzed like live wires. They dove at Lirael, illusions solidifying into claws that raked her arm, tearing fabric and drawing thin lines of blood. She swatted one aside with a gust of wind, her face twisting in a grimace as she glanced at Terry. "Your tech—jam their projections before they multiply!" The nexus tether pulsed brighter, pulling them inexorably downward, toward the entity's throbbing core—a colossal nexus of veins and crystal suspended in the void. Terry nodded, rerouting power from his shield to the emitter. He blasted a pulse wave, the kinetic force rippling outward in a concussive ring. It shattered a dozen minions mid-air, their forms bursting into harmless sparks that fizzled against the walls, leaving craters of fused rock. The real ones scattered, wings shearing against the shockwave's edge. Elara leaped across a protruding ledge, vines propelling her to a pulsing conduit embedded in the wall—a syndicate beacon, its crystal orb throbbing in sync with the tether. "Here—interface it. Amplify the pull to drag us closer!" Her hands pressed against

it, roots infiltrating the base to stabilize the connection. The orb hummed, logs fragmenting into holographic bursts: schematics of the multiversal engine, overlaid with corrupted Nexus-weave designs. Terry's father's signature flashed—twisted experiments fusing blight with engine cores, blueprints for weaponizing the corruption across realms. "Damn it— he's merging Dad's work with this monstrosity," Terry growled, slamming his emitter into the conduit's port. Runes interfaced, data flooding his visor. The pull intensified, the tether yanking them toward the core like a grapple line. But the entity reacted; a blade-tipped tentacle speared upward, corrosive ichor spraying in an arc that sizzled against Lirael's barrier, eating through the weave and blistering her forearm. She hissed, countering with a lightning chain that forked into the core, disrupting its pulse. Electricity danced across veins, charring segments and sending spasms through the limbs. The core bucked. Tentacles retracted partially, but not before one grazed Elara's side, blades nicking her ribs through armor. Blood welled, warm and sticky, but she pressed on, vines lashing to haul the group closer. "Keep it off-balance— we've got the logs!" Her eyes met Lirael's, a quick tilt of her head signaling trust in the stormweaver's next surge. Lirael channeled a tempest, winds howling through the chasm to buffet the swarms. Minions tumbled into the void, wings crumpling as they smashed against protrusions, chitin cracking like eggshells. The entity spawned more, but the amplified tether overrode, reeling them in. Terry fired lances into the core's exposed facets, plasma bolts detonating in bursts that vaporized crystal, sending shards raining down like shrapnel. One lodged in his thigh, a hot sting that buckled his knee momentarily. Regeneration faltered under the assault. The core's glow dimmed, veins withering as lightning cauterized leaks. But the leader's influence lingered—a stabilizing rift yawned at the chasm's nadir, edges flickering with multiversal distortions. "Through it—now!" Terry roared, the tether propelling them into the vortex. Space folded. Seismic upheavals wracked the conduit, walls fracturing in cascades of debris that pelted their backs. They tumbled out the other side, scattered across a fortified sanctum—reinforced bulkheads humming with energy shields, consoles arrayed around a central engine dais. The leader whirled from his station, armored form silhouetted against the throbbing machine, but reinforcements

converged: enforcers in exosuits bursting through side hatches, rifles priming with rift-charged rounds. Elara landed in a crouch, vines snapping to steady her as blood trickled from her side. Lirael hit the deck rolling, lightning sparking from her fingertips despite the fresh burns. Terry skidded to a halt, emitter raised, the nexus tether snapping taut between them and the leader. The engine whirred to life, veins pulsing in rhythm, drawing the abomination's remnants through the rift behind them—a final tentacle clawing at the threshold. An enforcer fired, bolt grazing Terry's shield and scorching the air. He retaliated with a plasma grid, beams crisscrossing to melt the shooter's visor in a flash of superheated glass. Elara's arrow felled another, thorns exploding to entangle his legs, yanking him down into a crumpling heap. Lirael summoned a gale, hurling two more into the wall with bone-jarring force, armor denting on impact. The leader raised his gauntlet, the engine amplifying his weave. The tentacle surged fully into the sanctum, blades sweeping low. Terry dodged, heart pounding, and charged forward, emitter blazing.

Terry's emitter buzzed, unleashing a barrage of plasma lances that carved glowing furrows into the tentacle's armored hide. Ichor sprayed in thick arcs, sizzling against the sanctum's metal grating and etching pits into the floor. The appendage recoiled, blades whipping through the air with a resonant whoosh that displaced the stale, ozone-laced atmosphere. He rolled aside, the edge shearing a console in half; sparks erupted, showering the deck like molten confetti. Elara vaulted over a fallen enforcer, her satchel spilling thorn-seeds that she crushed underfoot. Barbed tendrils thrust from the grates, coiling around the tentacle's base like iron pythons. They bit deep, thorns skewering flesh and drawing more of that viscous ooze, which hardened into brittle scabs upon contact with air. "Pin it down!" she bellowed, voice edged with grit as she nocked another arrow, the fletching quivering from her strained draw. Lirael staggered to her feet, palms crackling with residual charge. She thrust her hands forward, birthing a cyclone of jagged winds that lashed the tentacle's length. Gusts tore at its surface, flaying strips of corrupted tissue that fluttered away like ragged banners. The appendage bucked, slamming into a bulkhead and crumpling the reinforced plating

with a thunderous clang. “It’s linking to the engine—sever the connection!” Lirael bellowed, her eyes flicking to the central dais where the leader manipulated glowing runes on his gauntlet. The armored figure—his visor a blank slate of polarized alloy—didn’t flinch. He pivoted, gauntlet pulsing in sync with the engine’s core, a colossal orb veined with throbbing black conduits. The machine buzzed louder, drawing ambient energy from the sanctum’s walls; lights flickered, shields wavering as power diverted to the abomination’s remnant. “Fools,” he intoned, voice modulated through filters into a gravelly echo. “The engine awakens what your father only dreamed of binding.” Terry’s jaw clenched at the mention, but he channeled it into focus. He sprinted across the deck, boots skidding on ichor-slick metal, and slammed his emitter against a nearby panel. Circuits interfaced with a sharp buzz, his runic code flooding the system. A kinetic shield ballooned outward, repelling an enforcer’s rift-charged bolt; the projectile detonated against the barrier in a bloom of crackling energy, hurling the shooter rearward into a sparking console. “Elara, vines on the conduits—starve it!” Terry bellowed, his tone laced with command that brooked no debate. She nodded once, sharp and efficient, already weaving through the chaos. An enforcer lunged at her flank, exosuit servos whirring as he swung a vibro-axe. Elara twisted mid-stride, loosing an arrow that embedded in his joint plating. Vines bloomed from the shaft, prying servos apart with relentless force; the weapon clattered free, and she drove her boot into his chest plate, toppling him into the tentacle’s path. The appendage crushed him without pause, bones grinding under its weight. Lirael hurled a bolt of lightning that arced across the chamber, forking into the engine’s veins. Electricity leaped along the black conduits, charring them to brittle husks that split and wept oily residue. The tentacle spasmed, blades carving erratic gashes in the air— one nicked Lirael’s shoulder, parting fabric and drawing a thin line of blood that froze in the sudden chill radiating from the core. She hissed, clapping a hand over the wound, but her free fingers summoned a counter-gale, shoving the limb back toward the rift’s fading maw. More enforcers poured in, hatches sizzled open to admit a dozen in gleaming exosuits, rifles crackling volleys of rift rounds that punched craters into walls and sent ricochets whining. Terry’s shield held, but fractures spiderwebbed its surface; he dropped to one knee, emitter over-

heating in his grip, the barrel glowing cherry-red. “Lirael, cover the flanks—Elara, with me on the dais!” His words carried an undercurrent of urgency, eyes locking on hers for a split second—a silent plea amid the tactical frenzy. Elara vaulted a barricade of toppled crates, thorns trailing in her wake like living shadows. She reached the dais first, embedding thorn-seeds into the engine’s base. Vines snaked upward, wrapping the orb’s equator and squeezing, black veins bulging under the pressure before bursting in sprays of caustic fluid that etched her gloves. The leader swung toward her, gauntlet unleashing a pulse wave that rippled the air; it struck her barrier of woven roots, splintering them and hurling her back against a console. Pain flared in her ribs—cracked, maybe— but she rolled, firing a vine-laced arrow that glanced off his pauldron. Terry flanked him, plasma grid deploying in a web of searing lines. Beams pierced toward the leader, who raised his arm; an energy field deflected most, but one grazed his thigh plating, melting a seam and exposing servos that sparked erratically. “Your father’s designs were the key,” the leader growled, circling the dais with predatory grace. “He saw the potential in Riftblight— not to seal it, but to harness it. The engine fuses it all: multiversal rifts, Nexus-weave, the corruption’s raw hunger.” Lirael weaved through the enforcers, winds propelling her like an unseen current. She unleashed a torrent that bowled three into a heap, their rifles discharging wildly into the ceiling; debris rained down, panels buckling and exposing wiring that spat arcs of electricity. A round clipped her leg, burning through leather and searing flesh— she bit back a cry, channeling the pain into a lightning chain that leaped from foe to foe, cooking armor and eliciting screams as bodies convulsed. “Talk less— fight!” she retorted, her glare toward the leader masking the doubt flickering in her stance. Terry’s plans always pushed the edge; this sanctum reeked of the same hubris. The tentacle, weakened but furious, lashed out anew. It coiled around an enforcer, blades folding inward to pulp him in a spray of blood and shattered plating. Ichor pooled on the deck, seeping into cracks and birthing smaller tendrils that quested blindly, latching onto legs and pulling victims down. Terry fired into the mass, plasma detonating in subsurface blasts that ruptured the appendage from within; chunks of flesh sloughed off, steaming and dissolving into acrid vapor. Elara regrouped, vines

reinforcing her advance. She and Terry converged on the dais, his emitter linking to a side console while her thorns pried open a access panel. Holographic logs flickered to life— fragmented projections of schematics, Terry's father's voice droning over grainy footage: "...the corruption isn't chaos; it's evolution. Fuse it with the engine, and we bridge realms without the old instabilities." The leader's modifications overlaid the designs: veins of Riftblight threading through Nexus circuits, amplifying output into a weaponized surge capable of seeding blights across dimensions. "Shut it down," Terry muttered, fingers flying over the interface, code compiling to override the core. But the leader lunged, gauntlet clamping his wrist. Energy surged, feedback jolting Terry's arm— muscles seized, vision blurring with phantom sparks that stabbed like needles behind his eyes. He tasted copper, nausea roiling his gut as the connection fed him echoes of the engine's buzz, a physical throb in his skull. Elara struck low, vines erupting to ensnare the leader's legs. Thorns pierced joints, locking servos; he staggered, releasing Terry with a snarl. Lirael arrived in a whirlwind, gale slamming the armored form into the dais. The impact dented his chest plate, but he recovered, ripping free and countering with a rift pulse that warped the air— Elara dodged, but the distortion bent her arrow mid-flight, splintering it harmlessly. Enforcers closed in, rifles chattering. Bullets pinged off Terry's faltering shield, one shattering it outright and grazing his arm, carving a furrow that wept blood. He retaliated with a point-blank plasma lance, vaporizing the closest assailant's helmet in a flash that lit the chamber like dawn. Lirael summoned a barrier of churning winds, deflecting the barrage, but it drained her; sweat beaded on her brow, burns throbbing as she held the line. The engine whirred to a fever pitch, the tentacle dissolving into feeding veins that latched onto the orb, pumping fresh corruption. Logs scrolled faster— the leader's plan crystallized: ignite the multiversal engine with paternal blueprints, unleashing a blighted wave to remake Earth in Riftblight's image, syndicate enforcers as the new vanguard. "Overload it— now!" Terry yelled, slamming his emitter home. Plasma flooded the conduits, fusing with Elara's vines and Lirael's lightning in a hybrid cascade. The engine bucked, veins rupturing in explosive bursts that showered the sanctum with shards. The leader reeled, visor cracking under the strain, but

he activated a failsafe— hatches sealed, reinforcements piling in from vents and bulkheads, exosuits gleaming with fresh rift munitions. Elara tore a vine free, thorns dripping ichor, her side bleeding freely now. Lirael leaned on a console, leg buckling under her weight. Terry rose, emitter spent but resolve ironclad, facing the armored silhouette amid the converging horde. A low rumble built from the core, the engine's heart cracking open to reveal something stirring within— not remnant, but rebirth.

Chapter 18: Echoes of Rebirth: Sanctum Siege

The sanctum's vaulted ceiling groaned like a beast in labor, chunks of duracrete raining down in staccato bursts. Terry braced his palm against a buckled console, fingers flying across its flickering interface as he rerouted power to the nearest bulkhead. Sparks danced from severed cables, their acrid tang mingling with the ever-present ozone bite of corruption— that sickly sweet undercurrent of charred caramel turning his stomach. Beside him, Elara crouched low, her hands plunged into a rift of exposed soil where the floor had cracked open, coaxing thorny roots to snake upward and barricade a breached hatch. Lirael leaned against a toppled pillar, her face ashen, one arm cradled against her ribs where the earlier electrocution had left angry welts blooming beneath her torn sleeve. She gritted her teeth, summoning a faint crackle of static around her fingertips, but her breaths came in shallow hitches. From the chamber's heart, the overloaded engine throbbed—a colossal sphere of twisted alloys and pulsating veins, its surface slick with oily black ichor that dribbled in viscous ropes. Holographic schematics flickered within the corruption, fragments of Terry's father's blueprints warping into grotesque mandalas of Nexus-weave: circuits fusing with vein-like filaments, runes twisting into predatory coils. The core convulsed, birthing the first regenerative tendril— a towering appendage of fused metal and flesh, armored in crystalline barbs that wept a shimmering sludge. It lashed out, smashing a support strut into twisted scrap, the impact reverberating through the deck like a hammer on anvil. "Enforcers inbound from the east vents!" Terry bellowed, his voice slicing through the din as his wrist

emitter buzzed to life. He thrust his arm forward, channeling mana through the device's core; bolts of superheated plasma pierced in a searing grid, carving into the tendril's base. The beam gouged molten furrows, superheating the ichor to steam that sizzled and popped, filling the air with the wet sizzle of boiling corruption. The appendage recoiled, segments crystallizing into jagged spurs before regenerating in a frenzy of bubbling growth, shards of it flinging outward like shrapnel to pepper the walls. Elara rose in a fluid surge, her bowstring taut as she unleashed a volley of arrows tipped with her own woven vines. The projectiles burrowed into the converging horde—exosuit-clad enforcers clanking forward in a phalanx, their visors glowing with rift-infused optics, flanked by spawned abominations: towering titans with flesh-melded plating that dragged rusted claws across the floor, screeching like nails on iron. Vines erupted from the impacts, thorny tendrils coiling around a titan's legs and yanking it off-balance; it bellowed, a guttural roar that shook loose dust from the rafters, as the roots tightened, splintering bone and grinding metal with audible crunches. "Hold the line—I've got the flanks!" Elara called, her jaw clenched in grim focus, sweat carving tracks through the grime on her brow. Lirael pushed off the pillar with a wince, her free hand weaving patterns in the air. A maelstrom gathered at her command, not some ethereal gale but a raw whirlwind of ionized air that tore through the chamber like a buzzsaw. Bolts of lightning forked from her palms, arcing into a cluster of crystalline spawns—clattering crystalline sprites birthed from the engine's leaks, their bodies a mosaic of oily shards that clicked and chittered as they skittered forward. The strikes hammered home, shattering carapaces into explosive bursts of fragmenting crystal; one sprite detonated in a spray of razor flecks, carving shallow gashes across an enforcer's armor before the man crumpled, his suit venting plasma in futile bursts. The ground trembled under the onslaught, craters pitting the deck where lightning grounded out, melting duracrete into glassy pools that steamed and cracked. But the horde pressed, relentless. An enforcer lobbed a grenade from his gauntlet—a breach-charged orb that burst into hallucinatory fog, conjuring phantom insects that buzzed with illusory stings, their wings a maddening hum that clawed at the edges of perception. Terry shook his head, blinking away the swarm's false prickle on his

skin, and slammed a plasma-charged fist into the console beside him. Emergency protocols engaged with a hydraulic sizzle; blast doors groaned shut on two hatches, sealing off side corridors just as more tendrils probed from the engine, their tips blooming into maws lined with petrified teeth that gnashed at the air. One appendage whipped toward Elara, forcing her to dive aside—her shoulder clipped a jagged console edge, drawing a thin line of blood that she ignored as she rolled and unleashed another vine-laced shot, ensnaring the thing's midpoint and hauling it taut until it snapped with a fibrous rip. Through the chaos, a holographic emitter on the engine flickered to life, projecting the armored leader's voice—distorted, reverberating from a hidden ritual alcove deeper in the sanctum. "Fools. The contingency awakens. Father's weave was but the seed; this rebirth will graft the multiverse into our engine." The words cut like static, revealing runes etched into the core's casing: a secondary ritual circle, pulsing with stolen Nexus patterns that drew on the corruption to accelerate the entity's growth. Terry's lip curled in a sneer, his fingers clenching the emitter's grip until the plastic creaked. "Your ritual ends here," he growled, redirecting a surge of energy; the plasma lattice intensified, veins along the engine blackening and bursting in fountains of caustic sludge that splashed across the floor, corroding deck plates into bubbling pits. The core's pulses quickened, the rebirth entity coalescing at last—a titanic hybrid horror rising from the sphere's cradle. Limbs of warped alloy fused with writhing flesh unfurled, crystalline spines erupting along its flanks as it hauled itself upright, the ground buckling under its weight. Ichor cascaded from its form, pooling and seeping into cracks where it began to reshape the stone into fleshy protrusions, veins threading through like parasitic roots. The air thickened with its stench, ozone laced with the cloying rot of burnt-sugar stench, as it reared back with a thunderous bellow that rattled Terry's teeth. Then the sanctum trembled violently, a seismic rift tearing open along the far wall—a jagged fissure belching multiversal distortions: churning maelstroms that warped the air, pulling at loose debris and yanking an enforcer's corpse into oblivion with a wet slurp. The hybrid horror lurched toward it, drawn by the instability, its tendrils questing into the void. "Move—evacuate now!" Terry shouted, grabbing Lirael's good arm to haul her upright as Elara slashed

vines across a final spawn, shattering it into glittering refuse. They bolted for a side corridor, the breach's pull tugging at their heels like invisible hooks. Lirael's steps faltered, her injured side heaving with each labored breath, a fresh trickle of blood staining her tunic from the strain. Elara supported her from the other flank, vines retracting into her sleeves as they ducked under a collapsing archway. Distant echoes boomed—rumbles of something immense stirring beyond the walls, converging on the sanctum's heart. Terry glanced back once, plasma emitter charging with a shrill whir, as the hybrid's claw gouged the deck in pursuit.

The corridor ahead twisted like a ruptured vein, its walls slick with oily seepage that dripped from fractured conduits overhead, pattering against the grated floor in rhythmic splats. Terry's boots skidded on the residue, the acrid tang of corroded metal biting into his nostrils as he yanked Lirael forward, her weight sagging against his shoulder. She grunted, teeth gritted, her free hand clamping over the gash in her side where blood welled anew, soaking through the makeshift bandage and trickling warm down her ribs. Elara flanked them, her breath coming in sharp huffs, eyes darting to the shadows where the air shimmered with faint distortions—hallucinatory flickers testing their edges, conjuring phantom claws that scraped harmlessly against the stone before dissolving into wisps of vapor. "Keep pressure on it," Elara muttered, her voice low and edged, as she thrust a palm forward. Thorny tendrils erupted from the floor in a whip-crack burst, coiling around a buckling support beam to brace it before it could crash down and block their path. The vines rasped against the metal, fibers grinding like teeth, buying them seconds. Behind, the hybrid horror's bellow echoed, a guttural vibration that hummed through the deck plates and set Terry's molars aching. Its massive form thrashed in the sanctum, claws rending bulkheads with shrieks of tearing alloy, sending chunks of debris hurtling into the corridor like shrapnel. Terry twisted, emitter raised, and unleashed a lance of superheated plasma that streaked back through the gloom—a brilliant azure streak that punched into the pursuing entity's flank. The impact sizzled, vaporizing a swath of writhing flesh and alloy in a burst of steam that fogged the air, the stench of charred protein mingling with the ozone reek.

The horror recoiled with a seismic stomp, its crystalline spines fracturing in a cascade of glittering shards that pinged off the walls, but regeneration already knit the wound, tendrils bubbling up from the cauterized edges like molten tar. “Can’t outrun that thing forever,” Lirael rasped, her face paling as she leaned harder into Terry, each step jarring her wound and drawing a hiss through clenched teeth. Sweat beaded on her brow, freezing into icy droplets in the corridor’s chill draft from the rift. “We need to seal these hatches—slow it down.” Elara nodded curtly, her fingers flexing as she summoned a fresh coil of vines from a cluster of exposed roots snaking through the wall—corruption’s insidious spread, twisting the academy’s ancient stone into veined mockery. “Agreed. Terry, cover us.” She didn’t wait for confirmation, darting to the nearest bulkhead hatch, its control panel flickering erratically under a layer of pulsating blight. Lirael staggered to her side, channeling a gust of wind that howled through the corridor, scattering the hallucinatory wisps and buying them a breath of clarity. The air crackled with static, her stormweave manifesting as jagged arcs that danced along the hatch’s seams, fusing the mechanism with a pop of superheated rivets. Terry pivoted, planting his feet wide against the slick floor, emitter humming as he wove a lattice of plasma threads across the corridor’s mouth—a glowing web that pulsed with restrained fury. Enforcers poured in from the sanctum’s chaos, their exosuits gleaming dully under the emergency strobes, rifles barking volleys of kinetic slugs that ricocheted off his barrier in sparks and whines. One slug grazed the edge, the impact vibrating up his arm like a hammer blow, numbing his fingers and forcing him to readjust his grip with a curse. He retaliated with a focused burst, the plasma lancing through an enforcer’s visor in a flash of vaporized glass and flesh, the body crumpling with a metallic clatter. The hybrid loomed larger in the lattice’s glow, its tendrils probing the energy field, sizzling where they touched. One barb lashed out, snagging an enforcer and yanking him back into the fray with a scream that cut short in a wet crunch. More abominations spawned from the entity’s core—crystalline scuttlers skittering along the walls, their legs clicking like shattering ice, mandibles dripping viscous ichor that hissed on contact with the floor. Terry’s lattice flared brighter, severing a cluster mid-leap; they exploded in a spray of jagged fragments that embedded in the

opposite wall, one shard whistling past his ear close enough to slice a shallow line across his cheek, warm blood trickling down his jaw. “They’re converging—hordes from the outer breaches,” Elara barked, slamming the hatch controls with a vine-wrapped fist. The panel groaned, servos whining as it ground shut, but not before a scuttler wedged its claw in the gap. Lirael drove a lightning bolt into the creature, the strike arcing with a deafening crack that left black spots dancing in Terry’s vision and a metallic tang on his tongue. The scuttler convulsed, its carapace shattering like frozen glass, but the backlash jolted through the hatch, buckling the frame and sending a tremor up Lirael’s arm. She staggered, her injured side buckling fully now, forcing her to brace against the wall as pain lanced through her—a sharp, breath-stealing stab that made her vision blur and her knees weaken. Terry glanced her way, jaw tightening, but he didn’t pause. “Push through—next hatch!” He dismantled the lattice with a gesture, the energy dissipating in a shower of dissipating sparks that singed the air, and fired a sweeping arc to clear the path. The plasma carved furrows into the floor, molten grooves bubbling and steaming, tripping a wave of enforcers who tumbled into the scuttlers’ path. Claws met armor in a frenzy of screeches and grunts, buying the trio a momentary reprieve. They lurched onward, the corridor narrowing into a service tunnel lined with humming conduits that sparked erratically, casting erratic shadows. The ground bucked beneath them, a fresh quake from the sanctum’s rift sending dust sifting from the ceiling and a low groan echoing through the stone. Distant booms punctuated the air—reinforcements breaching outer walls, or perhaps the colossal convergence stirring beyond, its presence felt as a deepening rumble that vibrated in their chests. Elara took point, her vines probing ahead like living sensors, snaring a hallucinatory assault before it fully materialized—a swarm of phantom insects that buzzed with illusory menace, their wings humming a disorienting drone. She crushed them with a squeeze, the tendrils pulping the projections into harmless mist, but the effort drained her, sweat streaking her face and her breaths ragged. “These distortions are worsening—feeding off the engine’s overload. We seal too many hatches, and we’ll trap ourselves with it.” Lirael’s response was a strained scoff, her hand pressing harder against her wound as she summoned another gale to propel them forward, the wind

whipping their clothes and scattering debris in eddies. “Better trapped than pulped. Terry, your father’s schematics—anything on bypassing these?” He shook his head, emitter whirring as he blasted a tendril that snaked through a vent overhead, the severed end writhing and spraying caustic fluid that ate into his boot’s sole, the heat searing through to blister his ankle. He bit back a yelp, shifting weight with a grimace—the burn throbbed like a hot coal embedded in flesh. “The data’s fragmented. But that ritual circle back there? It’s accelerating the rebirth—drawing multiversal energy to patch the hybrid. We overload the next conduit cluster, it might stall the whole convergence.” Elara’s eyes narrowed, vines retracting as she hauled open the next hatch, its hinges protesting with a metallic squeal. “Risky. One wrong surge, and we widen the rift.” Her tone carried the weight of doubt, fingers lingering on the frame as if weighing the choice, but she shoved through anyway, pulling Lirael with her. The tunnel beyond opened into a junction chamber, conduits branching like arteries, pulsing with erratic blue light laced with black veins of corruption. Enforcers swarmed the far end, exosuits clanking as they advanced, while scuttlers skittered from ceiling vents, dropping in chitinous rain. The hybrid’s roar filtered through, closer now, shaking loose panels that clattered to the floor. Terry raised his emitter, channeling a broader grid that arced across the junction, plasma threads igniting the air with a blistering heat wave that made his skin prickle. Elara countered with a barrier of woven vines, thick as cables, anchoring to the walls and floor to form a thorny bulwark that impaled the first wave of scuttlers on approach, their bodies bursting in sprays of crystalline gore. Lirael, slumped against a console, funneled her remaining strength into a tempest—a swirling vortex of wind laced with lightning that howled through the chamber, hurling enforcers into walls with bone-jarring thuds, one suit crumpling against a conduit in a spray of sparks that ignited his fuel pack in a whoosh of flame, the scream cut short by the inferno. The assault bought them space; Terry darted to the central conduit cluster, emitter interfacing with a hiss of connecting ports. Energy surged through him, a jolt that made his muscles seize and his teeth grind, but he overrode the locks, rerouting power in a feedback loop. Alarms blared, the conduits bloating with pressure, veins along their lengths swelling and

splitting in bursts of steam and sludge. The hybrid burst into view at the junction's mouth, its colossal frame filling the frame, a limb slamming down to shatter the vine barrier in a tangle of splinters and ichor. Tendrils lashed out, one coiling around an enforcer's leg and dragging him screaming into its maw, the crunch audible over the chaos. Terry's overload hit critical—the conduits detonated in a chain of explosions that rocked the chamber, flames licking the walls and hurling shrapnel in all directions. One fragment clipped Elara's shoulder, the impact spinning her sideways and tearing a gash that exposed raw muscle, blood sheeting down her arm as she clutched it, gasping. Lirael cried out, the blast wave slamming her against the console, the force compressing her chest and driving the air from her lungs in a wheeze, her vision spotting black. The hybrid staggered, its regeneration faltering as corruption veins recoiled from the surge, blackening and retracting with sizzles of dying flesh. But the rift's pull intensified, the junction floor cracking as distortions warped the air into a sucking vortex, yanking at their clothes and hair. "Evac—go!" Terry bellowed, severing the interface and firing a parting plasma volley that bored into the entity's core, eliciting a bellow that drowned the alarms. He grabbed Elara's uninjured arm, hauling her toward a side vent as the chamber buckled, stone grinding in protest. Lirael followed, propelled by a final gust, her steps a hobble, blood loss turning her limbs leaden. The convergence's echoes grew louder, a thunderous cadence shaking the walls as they plunged into the narrowing escape route, the hybrid's claws gouging the threshold behind them.

The vent's confines squeezed like a vice, metal walls scraping Terry's shoulders as he shoved forward, Elara's weight dragging against his grip. Behind them, the hybrid's claws raked the entry, sparks flying in staccato bursts that lit the gloom like faulty strobes. The air thickened with the reek of ozone and charred sugar, corruption's signature fouling every breath. Lirael stumbled at their rear, her gales feeble now, each exhale a ragged rasp that reverberated off the ducts. "Forge ahead—ducts link to the outer shafts," Terry bellowed, his voice muffled by the buzz of buckling infrastructure. He fired a blind plasma bolt backward, the superheated bolt scorching the pursuing limb and eliciting a

wet, grinding screech as sinew fused with metal peeled away in smoking strips. Elara twisted in his hold, her good arm whipping up to loose a cluster of thorny vines from her bracer. The growths thrust through a grate, coiling around the claw's hinges with barbed insistence, roots burrowing into corrupted tissue. "This way's too narrow for that thing—seal it if you can!" she grunted, her words clipped as she yanked her shoulder, the laceration there oozing fresh crimson that slicked her fingers. The vines held for a heartbeat, then snapped under the hybrid's flail, but not before Lirael slammed a hatch mechanism with her palm. Sparks crackled from the panel, locks engaging with a hydraulic whir that bought them seconds. She braced against the wall, torso laboring in shallow bursts, the earlier blast's compression turning each inhale into a stab that buckled her knees. "Won't hold long. Charge for the junction—it's our out." They crawled onward, the duct sloping into a broader service corridor lined with flickering pipes. Yet the respite shattered as the floor lurched, a pulse rippling from the sanctum's depths. The overloaded engine's core stirred anew, its rebirth manifesting in writhing tendrils that pierced through grates and seams, each one laced with glowing Nexus schematics—twisted echoes of Terry's father's designs, glyphs flickering like corrupted code. One tendril cracked out, slamming into the wall inches from Terry's head, the impact cratering the metal and spraying fragments that peppered his cheek, drawing thin lines of blood that burned like acid. "Flank left—it's spawning!" Terry thundered, emitter buzzing as he wove a lattice of plasma arcs across the corridor. The beams sliced through the nearest tendril, severing it in a fountain of oily sludge that splattered the ground, crystallizing instantly into jagged spikes that cracked underfoot with brittle snaps. Elara pivoted, her vines surging from the floor in a tangle of thorns that ensnared a cluster of enforcers spilling from a side hatch. The soldiers, their exosuits mottled with rift corruption implants that fused armor to throbbing sinew, fired kinetic rounds that whined past her ear. One bolt nicked her thigh, the force jolting her leg sideways and numbing it from knee to hip, but she endured, roots tightening until servos whirred and bones crunched beneath. "They're herding us—watch the spawns!" From the tendrils' severed ends, crystalline scuttlers birthed in hordes, fist-sized horrors clattering across the walls with quartz

limbs scraping like fracturing glass. Lirael evoked a maelstrom, gales screaming through the corridor to hurl the insects into a sparking pipe, where they burst in pops of electric discharge, husks crunching into residue that glossed the path. But the effort cost her; a scuttler clamped onto her calf mid-gale, its limbs skewering fabric and skin, injecting a venom that made her leg fold, vision blurring with venomous haze. She stomped it flat, the crush releasing a puff of acrid smoke, but staggered forward with a wince. “These things multiply—prioritize the conduits, not the pests!” The corridor constricted again, emergency hatches sizzling open under automated protocols, but delirious assaults clawed in from the edges of perception. Spectral projections flickered into solidity, blades manifesting from ether to swing at Terry’s flank. He crouched, the edge whistling past and lodging in the wall with a clang that vibrated up his arm. One enforcer exploited the distraction, charging with a vibro-axe that cracked Elara’s vine barrier, shearing through and sending splinters flying. A fragment lodged in her forearm, the puncture twisting sinew and forcing a yelp as she wrenched it free, blood bubbling in rhythmic spurts. Terry interfaced a hatch panel on the fly, digits flying over glyphs to bolt it shut, the mechanism grinding closed just as a tendril probed the gap. “Leader’s ritual—it’s feeding the rebirth. Logs said contingency protocols.” A nearby console stuttered to life unbidden, projecting a holographic fragment: the armored figure in the sanctum, chanting over the core, glyphs aligning to siphon multiversal energies into the hybrid form. The image warped as a spawned monstrosity—a towering brute with rusted metal plating grafted to its hide—barreled through a parallel vent, slamming into the wall and broadening the wound. Lirael discharged a lightning torrent, forks leaping from her fingertips to the brute’s chassis, arcing across its form in blinding forks that fused plating into dross. The creature seized, dropping to its knees with a thud that quivered dust from the ceiling, but the discharge rebounded, blistering her palms and leaving them raw, blistered skin splitting with each flex. “That ritual’s pulling everything together—cut the projection!” Elara complied, her creepers thrusting from the floor in a tangle of emerald ropes, ensnaring the brute’s limbs and yanking them off-balance. Barbs pierced translucent armor, drawing wisps of shadowy vapor that dissipated with foul, sulfurous fumes. Terry layered a plasma lattice over it all, a fused

Nexus-weave that buzzed with converted mana, the energies colliding in a blaze of blue-white fury. The claw flailed, its enormous bulk convulsing. Hinges popped under the strain, ichor fountains geysering skyward before solidifying into brittle spikes that shattered on the ground. Pests swarmed in desperation, only to be pulped by Harlan's barrage, shells cracking like eggshells, lava innards spilling in steaming pools that warped the stone into grotesque, fleshy ridges. With a final, resonant bellow that vibrated through bones and set teeth rattling, the claw retracted into the breach, the wound sealing in a convulsion of collapsing edges. Fragments rained down, one nicking Elara's thigh and pinning her momentarily, the weight bruising sinew deep enough to hobble her stride, forcing a stifled curse as she shoved it free. But triumph soured as the armored leader, cloaked in shadowed exosuit plates, gauntlet raised. "You delay the inevitable," he sneered, voice modulated through a grille, activating a secondary portal with a surge of breach-energy. The maelstrom gaped wide, a churning maw of frost-rimed darkness that tugged at the air, pulling grit and embers into its howling core. The pull yanked Terry forward first, his soles scraping on ashen scree. Elara lunged to grab his arm, but the suction tore her loose, slamming her against Lirael. Harlan thundered orders, squad members firing grapples that snapped taut, only for the lines to fray against the portal's rim. One by one, they tumbled in, the volcanic heat giving way to a biting chill that raked lungs. They spilled out onto a frozen expanse, crystalline petals of ice blooming underfoot, the sky a bruised indigo swirling with snowflake gales. Distant thunders reverberated from steaming oases, where towering shapes stirred in the geothermal haze, a new sub-realm teeming with frozen abominations that turned toward the intruders with resonant, shattering cries. Terry rolled to his feet, plasma gauntlets reigniting with a spark, as the first frost-laced tendril snaked from the snow, crunching into the brittle snowpack.

The core thrummed like a heart ripped from some colossal beast, its armored plating buckling inward with a screech of tortured metal. Ichor-laced vapors belched from ruptured conduits, coating the sanctum's vaulted ceiling in a glistening sheen that dripped in heavy globs, sizzling where they struck the grated

floor. Terry skidded back, his boots grinding sparks against the deck as he recalibrated his gauntlets—left emitter for a wide plasma sweep to clear the spawning tendrils, right for pinpoint lances to hit the core's exposed joints. But the risk gnawed: one misfire could chain-react through the lingering overload, vaporizing them all in a mana-fueled inferno. His immediate goal clamped down—sever the primary vein feeding the rebirth before it could fully knit. Elara crouched beside a toppled console, her fingers digging into the soil of a shattered hydro-vat, coaxing thorny roots to erupt through cracks in the plasteel. The vines lashed out, barbed tips snagging at the first wave of enforcers charging from the sealed hatches—exosuit brutes with riftblight veins pulsing under their visors, rifles barking plasma rounds that chewed furrows into the walls. She weighed her options: bind the nearest pair to immobilize their advance, or arc the growth higher to block the hatch entirely? The enforcers' heavy footfalls vibrated the floor, closing fast; she chose the bind, roots coiling like pythons around armored legs, yanking one off-balance into a tangle of his own squadmate. A muffled grunt escaped a helmet as joints popped, but the effort tore at her thigh wound from earlier, fresh blood seeping through her torn leathers, hot and sticky against her skin. Lirael leaned against a buckling pillar, her breath ragged, one hand clamped over the electrocution scar on her side where flesh still wept plasma-burnt fluid. The air reeked of ozone and charred circuits, mingling with the burnt-sugar tang of riftblight as hallucinatory swarms buzzed at the edges of her vision—phantom insects with stingers like needles, solidifying into real threats that nipped at her boots. She dismissed the left flank's illusions with a flick of her wrist, channeling a gale to scatter them into harmless mist, but held back from a full tempest; the sanctum's confines could turn the winds against them, shredding allies in the backlash. Target the crystalline spawns emerging from the core instead—shatter their facets to disrupt the entity's cohesion. Lightning arced from her fingertips, forking into jagged bolts that hammered a cluster of glittering shards, exploding them into razor confetti that pattered like hail. The recoil jarred her ribs, pain lancing white-hot, but she bit down, tasting blood on her tongue. The armored leader's voice crackled from a hidden vox-grille, laced with synthetic disdain. "Fools. Father's legacy was never yours to hoard." A holographic

flicker danced across the core, projecting schematics—twisted Nexus-weave grids overlaid with riftblight fractals, blueprints Terry recognized from his own archived studies, now perverted into regenerative circuits. The revelation hit like a gut punch, but Terry shoved it aside, eyes locking on the leader's silhouette retreating behind a fortified dais. Contingency ritual—had to be priming a secondary ignition. He fired a plasma lattice, threads of superheated blue weaving a net that sliced through a surging tendril, cauterizing the stump in a burst of steam that scalded his forearm, blistering skin under his sleeve. Enforcers breached the nearest hatch with breaching charges, the blast wave slamming Terry against a console, jarring his elbow and numbing his grip. Shrapnel whined past, one fragment grazing Lirael's shoulder, parting cloth and drawing a thin line of crimson. She snarled, pivoting to loose a chain of lightning that danced between three suits, fusing servos in crackling overloads. Bodies slumped, acrid smoke rising from visor slits, but more poured in—hordes now, augmented with blight-mutated limbs that ended in claw-tipped gauntlets, slashing at Elara's vines with corrosive edges that dissolved the barbs into bubbling sludge. "Seal that breach!" Terry barked, voice cutting through the din of screeching metal and guttural roars. He lunged left, kinetic shield flaring to deflect a rifle burst, the impact shuddering up his arm like a hammer blow. Right would expose his flank to the core's pulsing maw; instead, he rolled under a console, emitter humming as he jury-rigged a mana-siphon from a loose cable—suck energy from the wall to amplify his next shot. The floor trembled, cracks spiderwebbing outward from the core, where the rebirth entity stirred. Tendrils thickened, weaving into proto-limbs infused with those damned schematics: one segment flickered with runic code, self-repairing mid-sever as if mocking his precision. Elara vaulted a fallen enforcer, her bow drawn in a fluid arc—arrow tipped with a venomous elixir she'd brewed from scavenged blight shards, now loosed to embed in a tendril's base. The growth withered, blackening and crumbling, but the counter-lash came swift: a spawned abomination, a hulking fusion of exosuit wreckage and crystalline blight, barreled toward her. She dodged right, boot slipping on ichor-slick grates, and countered with a whip of vines that cracked against its chassis, denting alloy but snapping back to score her palm raw. Pain flared, but she pressed, roots burrowing

into its joints to pry them apart with grinding creaks. Lirael's tempests built, winds howling through the sanctum, whipping snow from the encroaching rift distortions—wait, snow? The air chilled abruptly, frost riming the edges of the hatches as multiversal bleed seeped in, turning the battleground into a treacherous mire of ice and sludge. She targeted a crystalline spawn cluster, bolts hammering down to pulverize them into glittering dust that swirled in her gale, but the effort drained her; vision blurred at the edges, the burn in her side spreading like fire through veins. An enforcer's claw raked her leg mid-stride, tearing fabric and flesh in a hot sting, forcing her to stagger back against the wall, breath fogging in the dropping temperatures. The core convulsed, the rebirth entity coalescing—immense now, a hybrid horror of veined flesh armored in warped Nexus-plates, its form bulging with unnatural bulges where schematics etched glowing paths. A limb unfurled, slamming the floor and sending shockwaves that buckled supports overhead, debris cascading in a roar of stone and twisted rebar. Terry's siphon engaged with a whine, channeling stolen power into a lance that pierced the entity's shoulder-joint, molten slag erupting in a fountain that singed his hair. But the wound knit almost instantly, tendrils regenerating around the breach, infused with that paternal legacy—his father's precision turned to abomination. "Hatches—now!" Elara yelled, her voice hoarse over the cacophony. She wove vines across the widest breach, thorny lattice sealing it against pounding fists, but the strain pulled at her bruises, a groan escaping as muscle protested. Enforcers hammered from the other side, welds sparking, the barrier holding by threads. Lirael sealed the secondary hatch with a frozen gale, ice blooming across the seams in crackling layers, but the cold bit deeper into her wounds, numbing limbs even as blood welled warmer. The entity's roar built, a seismic rumble that cracked the sanctum's foundation, a rift tearing open beneath the core—jagged tear spilling frost-laced distortions, pulling at gear and loose panels with vacuum force. Terry assessed: fight the forming horror head-on, or evac through the collapsing east corridor? The entity's bulk blocked the direct path, limbs sweeping wide enough to crush them flat; retreat meant navigating buckling decks slick with ichor and ice. Goal crystallized—drag the team out before the rift swallowed the sanctum whole. He grabbed Elara's arm, yanking her toward the

east archway as the first distortion warped the air, snowflakes materializing to lash like needles. They bolted, Lirael limping behind, her hand trailing sparks that lit the way. The corridor narrowed, walls groaning inward, frost veining the stone as the rift's pull tugged at their backs. Elara's vines snaked ahead, bracing fallen beams to hold the passage, but one snapped free, slamming her shoulder and drawing a hiss of pain. Lirael's steps faltered, the gash on her leg slowing her, each press forward grinding salt into the wound. Distant echoes boomed—thunders from converging hordes beyond the walls, the ground quaking as if something vaster stirred below. A new tendril burst through the floor ahead, frost-rimed and questing.

Chapter 19: Echoes of the Frostfire Abyss

The rift's maw spat them out like shattered glass, hurling Terry, Elara, and Lirael onto a fractured ledge of blue-veined ice. Frigid wind clawed at their faces, carrying the acrid tang of ozone laced with burnt sugar—the unmistakable reek of Riftblight seeping from cracks in the frozen expanse. Jagged spires thrust upward like broken teeth, their surfaces flickering with veins of pale blue frostfire that erupted in sporadic geysers, spewing superheated vapor that hissed against the sub-zero air. Terry skidded to a halt, his boots crunching through a layer of crystallized corruption that pulsed faintly beneath, as if the ground itself breathed. Before he could recalibrate his emitter, the ambush hit. Swarms of ice-laced horrors—twisted amalgamations of chitin and frozen flesh—erupted from fissures in the spires, their limbs ending in razor-sharp icicles that dripped oily black ichor. The creatures skittered forward on multiple legs, mandibles clicking with wet, crackling snaps, while behind them, hallucinatory echoes materialized: spectral warriors from the Sundering era, their forms solidifying from translucent mirages into hulking figures clad in rusted armor fused with pulsating blight-shards. One phantom swung a broadsword that hummed with corrupted energy, carving a gouge through the ice that sprayed shards like shrapnel. Terry rolled left, away from a lunging horror's icicle claw that embedded in the ledge and shattered it into a web of cracks. His immediate goal: clear a path to higher ground, where the spires

offered cover from the swarms. Fleeing right meant plunging into a geyser pit, risking scalding frostfire burns on top of Lirael's existing wounds. He flicked his wrist emitter active, channeling mana through its runic circuits to unleash a lance of superheated plasma. The bolt streaked out, vaporizing the nearest horror's forelimbs in a burst of steam and sizzling ichor, the creature's body convulsing as its frozen shell melted into puddles that steamed and bubbled with black veins. Elara landed in a crouch beside him, her fingers digging into the icy ground. Vines burst from her palms, thorny tendrils whipping upward to ensnare two solidifying projections—warriors mid-charge, their blades raised. The vines coiled tight, thorns piercing rusted plate and drawing forth gouts of oily corruption that corroded the plant matter with a fizzing hiss. She yanked her arms back, slamming the foes into a spire; the impact pulverized their forms into crumbling frost and metal slag, but the effort tore at her stance, her breath coming in sharp gasps. Lirael, favoring her bandaged side where electrocution scars still wept plasma residue, staggered to her feet. Her stormweave cuffs flickered, sparking as she raised her hands. A gale howled from her palms, hurling a cluster of scuttling horrors off the ledge; their bodies pinwheeled into the void, smashing against distant spires in explosions of chitin fragments and frozen gore. "Console—there!" Terry barked, pointing to a pulsating obsidian pedestal half-buried in a drift of corrupted snow, its surface etched with glowing runes that throbbed like exposed arteries. It sat at the ledge's edge, exposed but vulnerable to the swarms funneling from a nearby crevice. Charging straight risked getting swarmed; circling wide exposed Lirael to the projections' ranged hurl of blight-shards, which could crystallize her wounds into immobilizing tumors. He opted for a breach: plasma to thin the horde, buy seconds for Elara's vines to bridge a gap. "Elara, root the flank. Lirael, gale the projections—keep 'em ethereal." Elara nodded, her jaw set in a grim line, and thrust her hands forward. Thorny lianas erupted from fissures in the ice, weaving a barricade that impaled three horrors mid-leap, their bodies jerking as the vines crushed exoskeletons with audible crunches, black ichor spraying in arcs that ate smoking pits into the frozen ground. The air thickened with the stench, burnt sugar overpowering the frost. Lirael channeled her cuffs, unleashing a tempest that crackled with electric fury; lightning

forks arced through the projections, their forms flickering before solidifying only to shatter like brittle glass, shards embedding in the ice with pinging impacts that left craters rimmed in ozone-scorched rings. Terry dashed forward, emitter humming as he fired a sweeping plasma arc. It carved through the swarm's front line, melting limbs and torsos into steaming husks that slumped and twitched, their innards bubbling out in viscous pools that corroded the ledge further, widening cracks that belched more horrors. One projection—a towering knight with a helm fused to tumorous spikes—lunged at him, sword cleaving downward. Terry sidestepped, the blade grazing his shoulder guard and shearing off a chunk of alloy with a screech. He countered with a kinetic shield pulse from his emitter, the force slamming the warrior back; its armor buckled, ribs of metal folding inward as it cratered against a spire, the impact sending tremors through the ice. They reached the console as one, Lirael limping, her free hand clutching a gash reopened by shrapnel. Terry slammed his palm onto the obsidian surface, runes igniting under his touch. Holographic echoes bloomed: flickering projections of his father, gaunt and wild-eyed, manipulating a Nexus-weave array in a lab overrun by blight. "The core... it amplifies," the echo rasped, voice distorting like cracking ice. "Harness the abyss's heart, fuse it to the engine—spread the blight not as plague, but as weapon. Realms will kneel or shatter." The armored leader's plan crystallized in the display: siphoning the sub-realm's frozen core to supercharge the corruption engine, turning multiversal rifts into conduits for weaponized mutations. Armies of fused horrors, continents reshaped into blighted fortresses—Earth first, then the drift. Elara's eyes narrowed, her fingers tightening on a vine-wrapped arrow nocked in her bow. Lirael hissed through clenched teeth, sparks dancing from her cuffs as pain lanced her side. Terry's lip curled in a smirk of grim satisfaction—proof his father's legacy wasn't madness, but sabotage waiting to be undone. But the console's pulse quickened, drawing more swarms; a fresh wave of horrors crested the ledge, their icicle claws scraping furrows in the stone. "Overload it," Terry growled, fingers flying over the runes, rerouting mana flow to destabilize the core. "Elara, bind the pedestal. Lirael, shield us—tempest surge." Elara's vines lashed out, coiling around the console's base like iron cables, thorns digging into obsidian to anchor it against the

gathering tremors. Lirael swept her arms wide, cuffs blazing as a whirlwind barrier roared to life, winds laced with lightning that battered back the encroaching horde—horrors shredded mid-air, projections dispersed in bursts of static and frost. Terry triggered the overload. Energy surged through the pedestal, runes flaring white-hot before erupting in a cataclysmic blast of frostfire. The geyser beneath detonated, a column of searing blue flame and ice shards rocketing upward, shattering spires into cascading debris. The ledge buckled, hurling Terry sideways; he clawed at the ice, emitter sparking as it absorbed the shock. Elara tumbled after, vines snapping free in a tangle that cushioned her fall but left her rolling toward a crevice. Lirael cried out, the tempest faltering as the surge clipped her, frostfire licking her legs and blistering skin through her boots. The explosion's roar echoed through the caverns, collapsing tunnels in distant booms that shook the sub-realm like a dying beast. But worse—the overload stirred something deeper. From the heart of the fractured expanse, a colossal echo-beast awakened. Its form coalesced from merging ice and Riftblight: a titanic horror with a hide of crystalline plates veined in oily black, limbs like segmented glaciers tipped with regenerative claws that knit even as they flexed. It bellowed, a thunderous crackle that split the air, exhaling a gale of frozen shards that peppered the trio like hail. Terry pushed to his knees, emitter recharging with a whine, eyes locking on the beast's distant silhouette amid the settling dust. Elara hauled Lirael up by the arm, the three of them scrambling toward a narrowing fissure as the ground heaved anew. The beast's claw scraped forward, gouging a trench that spewed corruption steam, drawing them inexorably toward the leader's sanctum hidden in the abyss's throat. Terry fired a probing plasma lance, the bolt glancing off a plate and melting a divot that bubbled with reforming blight, buying them moments to dive into the fissure's embrace.

The fissure swallowed them whole, a jagged maw of ice that scraped Terry's shoulders raw as he wedged through, emitter clutched in a white-knuckled grip. Behind, the echo-beast's bellow warped into a resonant hum that vibrated the walls, sending hairline cracks spiderwebbing outward. Shards rained down, one slicing across Elara's forearm like a razor, drawing a

thin line of blood that froze mid-drip into crimson icicles. She hissed through clenched teeth, vines retracting into her gauntlets with a wet snap, but didn't slow—her free hand shoved Lirael ahead, the injured woman's limp dragging like an anchor. "Keep moving—left fork narrows, it'll bottleneck that thing," Terry barked, twisting to glance back. The beast's claw—immense, a battering ram of segmented frost—thrashed at the entrance, pulverizing the lip into powder. The impact sent a shockwave rippling through the tunnel, buckling the floor and hurling Terry face-first into a protrusion of hoarfrost. His nose crunched against it, blood blooming hot and metallic on his tongue, stars exploding in his vision as he spat a glob of red onto the slick ground. No time to wipe it; he rolled, emitter humming to life, and fired a sustained plasma stream—not a lance, but a searing arc that lit the confined space in blue-white glare. The beam chewed into the claw's joint, superheating the crystalline plates until they popped like overripe fruit, ichor bubbling out in foul, sugary steam that clawed at his throat. Elara nodded sharp approval, her eyes flicking to the branching paths ahead—right led to a wider cavern, open but exposed; left squeezed tighter, forcing the beast to wedge if it followed. Risk was the exposure, but the bottleneck could turn it into a kill zone. She chose for them, lunging left while summoning a barrage of thorned barbs from her palms, launching them like grapples to snag the walls and haul Lirael along. "Vines for traction—grab on!" The barbs embedded with meaty thuds, pulling them forward in bursts that strained Elara's arms, muscles corded under her frost-rimed jacket. Lirael staggered, her blistered legs buckling every third step, each jolt drawing a ragged gasp that fogged the air. Frostfire had charred patches of her trousers to her skin, the pain a constant throb that made her lightning cuffs flicker erratically. She gripped the vines, channeling a pulse through them—a jolt of electricity that arced along the length, supercharging the growth into rigid cables. But the effort drained her; sweat beaded on her brow despite the chill, freezing into salty rime. "Can't... hold the barrier much longer," she ground out, voice raw from the earlier cry. Her gaze darted to Terry's plasma trail, calculating: if the beast pushed through, they'd need a surge to collapse the tunnel entirely. The tunnel constricted, walls pressing in like a vice, the air thick with the tang of ozone from Terry's shots and the underlying

rot of Riftblight—burnt sugar laced with something sharper, like molten glass. Distant echoes reverberated: not just the beast's rumble, but fractured cries, the clash of phantom blades from the Sundering visions. They weren't done with them yet. As the group squeezed onward, a side alcove yawned open, pulsing with that same obsidian glow from the console. Holographic tendrils snaked out, not illusions but solidifying projections—warriors from the old cataclysm, their armor warped into flesh-metal hybrids, axes raised in mid-swing. Terry skidded to a halt, boots scraping ice, emitter pivoting in a fluid arc. Flee past? No—the projections blocked the only clear path, and ignoring them meant getting flanked when the beast caught up. "Elara, bind their legs—Lirael, chain 'em down. I'll core the leader." He didn't wait for agreement, thumbing the emitter to wide dispersal; a plasma grid erupted, not a pinpoint strike but a web of superheated filaments that lashed out like electrified netting. The nearest projection—a hulking figure with a helm fused to its skull—lunged, axe whistling through the air. The grid caught it mid-stride, filaments searing into its chest plate, melting rivets into glowing slag. The warrior staggered, armor hissing as it drooped like wax, but didn't fall—Riftblight knit the damage, oily veins pulsing to reform the breach. Elara dropped low, palms slamming the ground; roots burst from fissures in the ice, coiling upward like serpents to snare the projections' ankles. Thorns pierced ethereal joints, drawing no blood but anchoring them with fibrous grips that creaked under strain. One root snapped back, yanking a spectral soldier off-balance; it crashed into the wall, helm crumpling against unyielding frost, cracks spidering across its form. But the effort pulled at her wounded arm, fresh blood seeping through the makeshift bandage, warm against the cold. She pivoted, assessing: more projections materializing from the alcove's glow—five now, axes glinting. Bind all? Waste energy. Target the flanks to funnel them. Lirael leaned against the wall for support, ribs heaving with each breath—earlier debris had bruised them, a dull ache flaring into fire on inhale. She extended her cuffs, summoning not a full tempest but targeted bolts: jagged forks of lightning that leaped from her fingertips, chaining between projections in a crackling web. The strikes hammered home, each impact exploding in bursts of superheated air that singed brows and filled the tunnel with the sharp crack

of thunder. One bolt grounded through a warrior's axe, traveling up the haft to burst its shoulder in a spray of vaporized ice and blight— the figure dissolved in a shriek, edges fraying like burnt paper. But the chain missed the last, which broke free of Elara's roots and charged, axe aimed at Lirael's exposed side. Terry intercepted, kinetic shield flaring—a dome of rippling force that absorbed the blow with a resonant gong, the impact jarring his arms and numbing his fingers to the elbow. He countered with a point-blank plasma lance, the bolt punching through the projection's gut, erupting out the back in a gout of molten residue that splattered the walls, hissing as it etched craters. The warrior crumpled, body flickering out in static bursts, leaving behind acrid smoke that stung the eyes. The alcove's holograms stabilized for a heartbeat, then surged with new data—echoes from the overload, manifesting as flickering visions around the projections' remains. Not just phantoms; the obsidian pulse replayed fragments of the past. Terry lunged forward, emitter scanning the alcove's core—a secondary node, veins throbbing like exposed arteries. He slapped a probe against it, data streaming into his gauntlet display: schematics of the corruption engine, overlaid with his father's notes. Holograms bloomed—Dr. Elias Prince, gaunt and wild-eyed in grainy projection, manipulating a Nexus-weave that bled Riftblight into mechanical cores."The abyss amplifies," the echo intoned, voice distorted like grinding gears. "Harness the core, and the engine spreads—realms chained in eternal mutation, armies of the blighted rising under one will." The armored leader's plan unspooled: not mere chaos, but a network of abyssal anchors, pulling sub-realms into alignment to fuel a multiversal blight forge. Terry's jaw tightened, a flicker of doubt crossing his features—he slammed the probe deeper, downloading the rest, fingers trembling not from cold but the weight of legacy. Elara glanced over, vines retracting as she bound a final fading projection; her brow furrowed, unspoken question in the tilt of her head—trust this inheritance? Lirael, catching her breath, shot a warning spark from her cuff, grounding a stray holographic tendril that lashed toward Terry's back. Friction simmered: Elara's roots had saved them seconds ago, but Terry's tech pulled the intel; Lirael's storm had cleared the path, yet her wounds slowed them all. The node overheated under the probe, runes glowing erratically. No time for full extraction—overload it

again? The beast's scrape echoed closer, claws rending stone in rhythmic gouges that showered dust. Terry yanked the probe free, data secured, and primed a disruption pulse. "Elara, reinforce the walls—Lirael, cover the surge." He triggered it; energy feedback arced through the node, igniting the veins in a cascade of frostfire flares. The alcove buckled, ceiling groaning as chunks plummeted, sealing the path behind in a barricade of rubble and steam. But the pulse rippled outward, stirring more visions—Sundering battles solidifying into fresh projections that clawed through the debris. Elara's vines whipped up, weaving a lattice across the narrowing tunnel ahead, thorns interlocking to form a flexible barrier against falling ice. One projection breached the collapse, a berserker with blades fused to forearms, charging with a guttural roar that echoed off the walls. Lirael met it head-on, unleashing a gale-force burst from her palms—winds howling with embedded lightning that slammed the figure back, blades scraping futilely against the air current, sparks flying as electricity danced along its limbs. The berserker twisted mid-air, crashing into Elara's lattice; thorns pierced its torso, roots contracting to crush inward with a series of wet pops, dispersing it in a haze of frost and static. Terry pressed the advance, emitter scanning for the sanctum's signature—a deeper throb amid the chaos. The tunnel sloped downward, air growing heavier, laced with the ozone bite of untamed magic and the sickly sweet of advancing blight. The beast's distant bellow shook loose more debris, a slab slamming down inches from Lirael's heel, the near-miss making her flinch and stumble, hand clutching her side where bruises purpled beneath frost-kissed skin. They couldn't outrun it forever; the sanctum's pull tugged like gravity, but so did the horror behind. A side vent hissed open, spewing geothermal steam that scalded Terry's cheek, raising a blister that popped with a sharp sting. Through it, a glimmer: the leader's trail, armored bootprints etched in melting ice. "There—vent drops straight. Elara, scout ahead; Lirael, brace for pursuit." Elara nodded, slipping into the vent with agile grace, vines probing the darkness like fingers. Lirael summoned a shielding gust, winds curling protectively as Terry followed, the group's shadows merging in the steam's veil. The beast's claw breached the rubble fully now, splintering stone with a thunderous crack that propelled them forward into the unknown depths.

The vent constricted like a frozen esophagus, walls slick with rime and pulsing veins that wept oily ichor. Terry slid feet-first, emitter clutched in one fist, its glow cutting erratic swaths through the gloom. Steam clawed at his lungs, hot bursts mingling with the chill that numbed his fingertips. Behind, the beast's bellow warped into a resonant grind, claws raking stone as it burrowed after them. Elara led, her form a shadow ahead, vines trailing like questing roots to test the drop. Lirael brought up the rear, breaths ragged, her free hand trailing sparks that lit the pipe in staccato flashes. A jolt yanked them downward—gravity spiking as the vent plummeted into freefall. Terry's stomach lurched; he twisted, firing a plasma lance upward to brake against the ceiling. The bolt seared a molten scar, slowing their descent with billowing vapor, but the heat singed his boots, leather charring. Elara's vines lashed out, anchoring to protrusions with barbed grips that groaned under the strain. Lirael tumbled past, shoulder clipping Terry's leg; he grabbed her wrist, muscles burning as he hauled her level. Her eyes met his—wide, pupils dilated from pain—but she nodded, channeling a gust that buoyed them all, winds whipping hair and frost into a frenzy. They spilled out into a cavernous hollow, boots crunching on fractured ice that spiderwebbed under impact. Frostfire geysers ringed the space, plumes erupting in azure bursts that painted walls with flickering shadows. The air hummed, thick with ozone and the acrid tang of molten sugar from encroaching blight. Immediately, the ambush hit: swarms of ice-laced horrors skittered from crevices, carapaces gleaming like shattered obsidian, mandibles clicking in rhythmic hunger. Larger shapes materialized—hallucinatory echoes of Sundering clashes, warriors in rusted plate solidifying from mist, axes materializing mid-swing with a metallic keen. Terry rolled left, assessing: straight ahead, a cluster of scuttlers blocked the far archway, their claws etching furrows in the floor; to the right, a geyser vented scalding spray, but it offered cover from the projections phasing through the steam. Fleeing blind risked trapping them against the rising tide behind; better to carve a path, thin the swarm first. He raised his emitter, thumbing the charge—risk of overload high with the ambient mana flux, but hesitation meant burial. "Elara, bind the flank! Lirael, chain the projections—keep 'em ethereal!" Elara darted right, palms slamming the ice; thorny vines erupted in a coiling surge, roots burrow-

ing through permafrost to ensnare a dozen scuttlers. Thorns punctured chitin with wet crunches, ichor spraying in black arcs that sizzled on contact. One horror broke free, lunging at her leg—claws grazing calf, drawing blood that froze mid-drip. She pivoted, boot stomping its dome; the shell cracked, legs twitching in spasms. The vines retracted, dragging corpses into the earth, but the effort left her staggering, breath fogging in plumes. Lirael braced against a stalagmite, side wound throbbing—a fresh gash from the fall weeping crimson. She extended both hands, summoning a chain of lightning: forked bolts leaped from her palms, arcing in jagged leaps that pried at the projections' seams. One warrior— a hulking berserker with shield raised—shuddered as electricity danced along its edges, armor bubbling like overheated slag. It bellowed, a sound that twisted into screams echoing from nowhere, but the bolt grounded through its form, dispersing it in a shower of frost shards that pelted Lirael's face, drawing pinpricks of blood. Another echo swung low, axe whistling; she dodged, the blade embedding in ice with a resonant thunk, but the near-miss buckled her knees, nausea roiling from the strain—a wave that tasted of bile and burnt wiring. Terry fired into the swarm's core, plasma lances streaking like azure comets. Each impact vaporized a scuttler, limbs exploding in puffs of steam and char, the ground hissing as superheated craters formed. The recoil jarred his shoulder, already bruised from the vent scramble, but he pressed, weaving a kinetic shield that shimmered into existence—a dome of rippling force deflecting a flung ice shard. It shattered against the barrier with a whip-crack, fragments raining harmlessly. Yet the projections adapted: one phased through his shield's edge, gauntleted fist clipping his jaw. Stars burst in his vision, copper flooding his mouth; he spat blood, tasting iron and frost. No time for retreat—the archway loomed, pulsing with the sanctum's throb, but these echoes multiplied, drawing from the cavern's veins. A scuttler leaped from above, mandibles aimed at Elara's neck. She twisted, vine-whip lashing out to snare its underbelly; the cord tightened, hauling it into the air before slamming it against a geyser. Steam engulfed it, carapace melting in a screech of evaporating blight."Console—there!" she barked, pointing to the chamber's heart: an obsidian pedestal throbbed, surface etched with runes that flickered like dying embers, holographic tendrils coiling from its crown. They con-

verged, backs to the pedestal. Terry interfaced his emitter, prongs clicking into ports; data flooded his visor—schematics of paternal experiments, weaves twisted into engines that siphoned rift energy. Holograms bloomed: his father, gaunt and shadowed, manipulating a core that mirrored this one, voice crackling: "The abyss amplifies—harness it, or it consumes." The armored leader's intent crystallized: fuse these echoes into the corruption engine, seeding realms with regenerating blight. Lirael's lightning arced protectively, frying a encroaching projection that smelled of phantom smoke—acrid, choking, though no fire burned. Her fingers dug into the pedestal's edge, knuckles whitening against the visions' onslaught: allies' faces warping into snarling masks, a momentary vertigo that made her sway. Elara's vines formed a perimeter, thorns interlocking into a bristling wall that impaled charging scuttlers, their bodies piling like cordwood. One horror burrowed under, erupting at her feet; claws raked ankle, tearing fabric and flesh. She hissed, grinding heel into its eyes, but the wound burned—blight seeping, skin bubbling with oily veins. "Overload it—now!" Terry's emitter whined, channeling excess mana; he routed plasma through the circuits, a physical surge that made the console vibrate, runes igniting in cascades of azure fire. The overload detonated. Frostfire erupted in a cataclysmic geyser, plumes blasting outward with concussive force. Ice spires shattered, shards pelting like shrapnel; Terry dove behind the pedestal, shield flaring to absorb a volley that dented the forcefield, vibrations numbing his arms. Elara's lattice splintered, vines charring black; she rolled clear, a chunk grazing her temple, blood trickling warm amid the chill. Lirael unleashed a tempest to counter the surge—winds howling, laced with lightning that forked into the blaze—but the backlash hurled her back, slamming ribs against stone. Pain lanced sharp, breath seizing; she coughed, tasting frost and blood. The cavern buckled. Ceilings groaned, slabs plummeting in thunderous booms that shook the floor, sending tremors up their legs. Projections winked out in the surge, but the data core's pulse tugged stronger, a magnetic draw yanking them toward the sanctum's hidden maw—a fissure cracking open in the far wall, steam billowing like breath from lungs. Yet the overload stirred deeper: the ground quaked, a colossal rumble building from below. Veins across the floor dilated, spewing frostfire laced with black ichor that merged, co-

alescing into a hulking form. The echo-beast awakened. It burst from the ice in a spray of shards, immense bulk uncoiling— a nightmare of regenerating flesh and blight, limbs reforming from stumps in writhing pulses, eyes glowing with abyssal frost. Jaws unhinged, exhaling a gale that howled with embedded shards, the air filling with the screech of tearing metal and the metallic tang of fear-sweat. Terry's emitter beeped warning—energy reserves dipping, shield flickering. Elara summoned fresh vines, roots probing for purchase amid the chaos. Lirael rose, palms crackling, but her stance wavered, hand pressing the gash at her side. The beast lunged, one regenerating claw sweeping low, forcing them to scatter as the sanctum's fissure widened, promising escape—or entrapment. Terry fired a plasma lance at its joint, the bolt searing flesh that bubbled and knit anew, buying seconds. They bolted toward the breach, the horror's pursuit cracking the world behind them.

Ice crunched underfoot as Terry sprinted, his boots slipping on frost-slick stone. The fissure loomed ahead, a jagged maw exhaling plumes of superheated vapor that warped the air like a mirage. Behind, the echo-beast's roar split the cavern—a guttural bellow laced with the wet crackle of reforming sinew. Its claw slammed down, splintering a spire into razor hail; shards whipped past Elara's shoulder, slicing her cloak with a hiss. "Flank it!" Terry barked, pivoting mid-stride to unleash a barrage of plasma lances. Bolts streaked blue-white, punching into the beast's flank. Flesh sizzled, black ichor bubbling out in viscous ropes that smelled of scorched syrup and ozone. The wounds knit instantly, tumorous spikes erupting from the craters, glinting with embedded ice crystals. But the hits slowed it—a hulking limb faltered, dragging furrows through the permafrost. Elara veered left, her fingers clenching soil from a pouch at her belt. She hurled it forward; thorny vines exploded from the ground in a tangle of barbed coils, lashing the beast's underbelly. Thorns pierced hide, drawing sprays of frost-laced pus that steamed on contact with the air. The creature thrashed, vines snapping with pops like breaking bones, but they held—roots burrowing deep, anchoring one leg in place. She glanced at Terry, jaw set. "Your shots buy the bind. Keep them coming—don't let it regroup." Lirael staggered right, her free hand weaving arcs that birthed a whirlwind of jagged

lightning. Bolts forked out, hammering the beast's regenerating shoulder with concussive cracks, shattering frozen plating into glittering dust. Electricity arced across its form, charring ridges of blight-fused muscle that writhed like living tar. Pain flared in her side, ribs grinding with each twist; she gritted her teeth, ignoring the warm seep of blood soaking her tunic. "Too slow," she muttered to Elara, eyes narrowing at the vines' strain. "We need to core it—aim for the eyes, not the limbs." The beast reared, its colossal frame blotting the cavern's glow. Towering twice their height, it was a grotesque fusion: torso of bloated, pallid flesh veined with oily black, armored in irregular plates of rime-crusted crystal that pulsed with inner light. Jaws gaped wide, exhaling a blizzard gale embedded with needle shards; the wind howled, carrying the acrid bite of burnt sugar that coated their throats. One limb swept wide, uprooting Elara's vines in a spray of dirt and ichor. She dove, rolling as the claw gouged the floor, sending tremors that buckled Terry's knees. He activated his kinetic shield—a shimmering dome snapping into place, absorbing the shockwave with a resonant thrum that vibrated his teeth. "Console ahead—fissure's edge!" He jabbed a finger toward the breach, where an obsidian pedestal jutted from the lip, its surface etched with flickering runes. Holographic flickers danced above it, grainy silhouettes of lab-coated figures—echoes from his father's era, gesturing at swirling rift models. The data pull tugged harder, a subtle vibration in his emitter syncing with the core's hum. Projections materialized from the chaos: translucent warriors from Sundering tales, their forms solidifying into armored phantoms wielding blades of solidified ether. One lunged at Lirael, sword whistling; she countered with a gust that hurled it back, the impact cratering ice. "These ghosts— they're feeding on the blight!" Her voice cracked sharp, palm slamming her side to staunch the flow, a gesture that spoke her doubt in Terry's jury-rigged path. Swarm followed swarm. Ice-laced horrors skittered from crevices—chitinous scuttlers with legs like serrated glass, mandibles clicking in wet snaps. They surged toward Elara, leaping in arcs that left frost trails. She loosed an arrow from her enchanted bow, the shaft blooming into a net of entangling roots mid-flight; it ensnared three, crushing shells with crunches that echoed like shattering porcelain. Ichor oozed, black and sticky, corroding the ground into bubbling pits

that released fumes of ozone tang. Terry fired into the pack, plasma bolts vaporizing clusters in bursts of steam and crackling pops. The air thickened with the stench—burnt sugar mingling with the metallic reek of superheated metal from his emitter. One scuttler latched onto his calf, claws piercing synth-leather; he stomped it flat, feeling the crunch through his sole, warm ooze seeping into his boot. “Push to the pedestal! Data’s our edge—leader’s using these echoes to prime the engine!” The beast charged anew, its regenerated claw raking the air. Terry rolled under the swipe, shield grazing the limb with a screech of energy on crystal. He rose firing, lances coring into its chest; superheated beams bored through, exposing a throbbing nexus of veins that pulsed black and blue. Ichor fountained, splattering his arm— the corruption burned like acid, flesh prickling as if spikes burrowed beneath skin. He shook it off, emitter whining in protest. Elara flanked, summoning a shockwave of roots that erupted in a ring, slamming the beast’s side. Barbs hooked into joints, tearing with fibrous rips; the colossus bellowed, a sound like grinding glaciers laced with gurgling fluid. She nodded toward Lirael, a quick tilt of her head. “Storm the veins—I’ll hold the swarm. Terry, shield the approach.” Lirael channeled deeper, arms thrusting forward. A torrent of lightning cascaded from her palms, not forks but a chained whip that lashed the exposed chest. Electricity surged through the veins, igniting them in flares of white-hot plasma; the beast convulsed, body arching as internal cracks spiderwebbed across its hide. Frozen plates shattered, raining chunks that thudded heavy, one clipping her shoulder and drawing a hiss of pain. She pressed on, the storm’s roar drowning the scuttlers’ skitters. Projections swarmed thicker—Sundering echoes manifesting as berserkers with axes that cleaved air, solid enough to draw sparks from Terry’s shield. He parried one with a kinetic pulse, the force hurling the phantom into a wall where it dissolved in a burst of etheric mist, leaving scorch marks. The pedestal neared, just paces away; holographic figures sharpened, one resembling his father—hunched over a rift model, voice distorted: “The core amplifies... harness the blight to bind realms... but the echoes will consume—” The beast recovered, lunging with impossible speed. Its maw clamped near Elara, jaws grinding stone; she leaped back, vines whipping to deflect, but a tooth grazed her

thigh, tearing cloth and flesh in a hot line. Blood welled, freezing in beads amid the chill. “It’s adapting—your plasma’s cauterizing too clean!” She grunted, roots probing to mend the wound, a brief flex of her fingers revealing her push for a riskier bind. Terry reached the pedestal first, slamming his emitter into the interface. Circuits hummed, data streaming—blueprints of the engine, father’s notes on echo-weaving: “The armored one twists my weaves... colossus as conduit, realms fused in blight.” The console vibrated, runes glowing as he initiated an overload, azure fire licking edges. Lirael diverted her storm, bolts hammering the beast’s eyes; orbs burst in sprays of viscous gel that sizzled on the ice, blinding one side. The colossus reeled, claw flailing blind— it crushed a projection swarm, axes and limbs tangling in a melee of shattering forms. But regeneration surged: stumps bubbled, new eyes forming in sockets with squelching pops, the air filling with that sickly sweet rot. Elara’s vines coiled tighter, thorns delving into the chest nexus, pumping sap that corroded the veins from within—black ichor frothed white, steaming. The beast thrashed, dislodging her; she tumbled, skidding toward the fissure’s edge, fingers digging into permafrost for grip. “Pull back—overload’s priming!” Terry yelled, the console bucking under his hands. Frostfire built, geysers erupting in preparatory bursts that scalded the air. Lirael hurled a final gale, winds shoving the beast off-balance; it staggered, ice cracking under its weight. But as the overload peaked, the colossus’s tail— a whipping mass of crystalline barbs—swept low, coiling toward the pedestal. The surge detonated. A geyser of frostfire lanced upward, engulfing the tail in roaring flames that melted barbs to slag. The beast howled, recoiling as the blast wave hurled Terry against the console, breath knocked out in a whoosh. Elara scrambled up, vines retracting charred; Lirael braced, lightning flickering dim as exhaustion tugged her stance. Caverns trembled anew, spires toppling in cascades of rumble and dust. The fissure widened with a groan, steam billowing thicker, revealing glimpses of a shadowed sanctum beyond—vaulted arches pulsing with rune-light. Data flooded Terry’s emitter: the leader’s plan, father’s echoes weaponized to seed the engine across voids. They dashed into the breach, the colossus’s roar fading behind—but a fresh tremor shook the walls, and from the depths, crystalline claws scraped, inching closer.

Chapter 20: Fissure Pursuit

Ice shards rained from the fractured ceiling as the console's overload ripped through the cavern, hurling Terry, Elara, and Lirael into the yawning fissure below. The blast's roar echoed off the narrowing walls, a thunderous crack that vibrated through their bones and left Terry's ears throbbing with a persistent whine. He twisted mid-fall, emitter humming in his grip, and fired a kinetic pulse to slow their descent—enough to land in a crouch on a slick ledge, boots scraping against rime-crusted stone. Elara hit the ground rolling, her bow already drawn, while Lirael slammed down harder, her bandaged shoulder crumpling under her weight. She bit back a grunt, fresh blood seeping through the wrappings as she pushed upright, staff crackling with restrained charge. Behind them, the echo-beast's bellow shook the chasm, a guttural howl that dislodged more debris. Its colossal form regenerated in pulses of frost-laced ichor, limbs knitting from shattered stumps with wet, grinding snaps. Minions spawned in its wake—ice-laced horrors skittering on needle-sharp legs, their crystalline bodies pulsing with oily veins that dripped black sludge onto the ice, hissing as it corroded the surface into pitted craters. "Move!" Terry barked, pivoting to unleash a lance of superheated plasma. The beam streaked blue-white, vaporizing the lead minion's forelimbs in a burst of steam and splintered crystal. Chunks plummeted past them, shattering on the ledge below and sending up sprays of razor flecks that nicked Elara's cheek, drawing thin lines of blood that froze almost instantly. Elara's vines erupted from her gauntlets, thorny tendrils lashing out like whips to ensnare a cluster of the crawlers mid-leap. The plants coiled tight, thorns piercing carapaces with pops of fracturing ice, then yanked the creatures into the walls. One vine snagged on a protruding spur, yanking her forward; she braced her feet, muscles straining, and hurled the impaled horrors back into the beast's maw. The echo-beast reared, jaws unhinging to swallow them whole, but Lirael channeled a surge of lightning through her staff—a jagged arc that forked into the gullet, charring flesh and forcing a reflexive snap that echoed like breaking glaciers. The fissure constricted ahead, walls grinding inward with groans of shifting stone. Geothermal bursts vented from cracks, scalding geysers that singed the air with sulfurous steam. Terry dodged

one plume, the heat blistering his exposed forearm and leaving welts that throbbed with each heartbeat. “Lirael, flank left—buy us distance. Elara, seal that breach spawning the small ones.” Lirael nodded curtly, her face pale from pain, but she vaulted a ledge with a gust of wind from her staff, the force propelling her over a cluster of minions. She landed amid them, staff slamming down to release a shockwave of electricity that arced across their forms, convulsing bodies in spasms before they burst into frozen shards. One crawler lunged at her leg, mandibles clamping her calf; she stomped it flat, the crunch reverberating up her bone, but the impact jarred her wounded shoulder, forcing a sharp inhale as agony lanced through her. Elara knelt at a fraying tear in the wall, oily blackness seeping like tar. She pressed her palms to the ice, murmuring incantations that made roots burrow from her sleeves, weaving into the rift’s edges. The vines thickened, thorns digging in to staunch the flow, but the corruption resisted, bubbling up in defiance and coating her hands in a sticky residue that burned like acid, reddening her skin in mottled patches. The echo-beast charged, its immense bulk wedging into the fissure, ice cracking under its weight. A limb—regenerated into a club of frozen sinew—swiped at Terry, who raised a kinetic shield. The impact hammered the barrier, the force rippling through to shove him back against the wall. His ribs compressed with a dull thud, breath exploding from his lungs in a wheeze; he tasted copper as he slid down, vision blurring for a heartbeat. “Terry!” Elara’s voice cut sharp, laced with accusation beneath the urgency. She loosed an arrow tipped with entangling thorns, embedding it in the beast’s joint. Vines bloomed from the wound, swelling to lock the limb in place, but the creature tore free with a roar, sending frozen barbs flying. One grazed Lirael’s arm, embedding deep enough to tear muscle as she wrenched it out, blood welling hot against the chill. Deeper in the chasm, the walls pulsed with a low hum. Terry’s emitter beeped, syncing with a faint signal. He slapped it against his wrist, projecting a holographic emitter that flickered to life—a grainy transmission from the armored leader, his voice distorted through static. “The core awakens. Frostveil’s heart will fuel the engine’s dawn. Join the convergence, or perish in the old world’s frost.” The image shattered as a minion’s claw raked the emitter, sparks flying. Terry crushed the crawler’s skull under his boot, the exoskeleton yielding with a wet pop.

“Final site—has to be the sanctum ahead. We overload the next node, cut off its pursuit.” Lirael’s eyes narrowed, staff sparking as she sealed a minor breach with a bolt that fused the edges in molten glass. “Your toys keep drawing them in. One more overload, and this whole chasm collapses on us.” “Better than letting that thing catch up,” Elara interjected, her tone clipped as she bandaged a frostbitten finger, the skin blackened at the tips. She glanced at Terry, jaw set—not trust, but necessity. They pressed on, the fissure twisting into a labyrinth of hallucinatory pitfalls. Void tendrils snaked from cracks, not invading minds but assaulting senses with tangible force: bursts of phantom heat that blistered skin like real flames, or illusory winds that buffeted them with gale-force shoves, slamming Elara into a crystalline trap. The structure—a lattice of jagged spikes—impaled her thigh shallowly, drawing a hiss as she twisted free, the wound pulsing with cold fire that numbed her leg mid-stride. Crystalline traps detonated underfoot, shards erupting like shrapnel. One clipped Terry’s shoulder, embedding fragments that he pried out with gritted teeth, each tug sending jolts that made his arm hang limp for seconds. Lirael countered with a lightning surge, the electricity grounding through the lattice and shattering it in a cascade of powder, but the backlash conducted back through her staff, numbing her fingers and dropping her staff with a clatter. The vein-node loomed—a throbbing orb of corrupted crystal embedded in the wall, pulsing black veins that fed the beast’s regeneration. Minions swarmed it, defending with frenzied snaps. Terry jury-rigged his emitter, linking it to the node with a plasma conduit. “Elara, bind it. Lirael, prime the surge.” Vines lashed out, thorns piercing the orb’s surface and coiling around its base, anchoring it as corruption oozed over her arms, corroding fabric and leaving raw, stinging welts. Lirael channeled her stormweave, arcs of electricity dancing along the vines, superheating the plasma feed. The node whined, building to overload. The echo-beast lunged, a pursuing limb—now a serrated tail—whipping through the air. It caught Lirael’s side, the barbs raking across her ribs and hurling her against the opposite wall. She bounced off with a cry, the impact cracking bone audibly; she clutched her side, breaths coming in ragged gasps that fogged the air, each one a stab of fire. “Light it!” Terry roared, slamming the emitter’s activation. The node detonated in a chain of fractures,

ice walls buckling inward. Boulders tumbled, burying the beast's forequarters in a grinding avalanche, its muffled bellows fading under the rumble. Steam vents erupted in response, one scalding Terry's back and blistering the skin into angry red patches that peeled with his frantic scramble forward. They clawed through the debris, emerging into the vast glacial sanctum—a cavernous expanse of vaulted ice arches, lit by the sickly glow of the blight engine's core. Pulsing conduits snaked across the floor, feeding a central obelisk that hummed with multiversal energy, rifts fraying at its edges like torn fabric. Enforcers in exosuits flanked it—hulking figures with rift implants bulging from their armor, weapons charging with oily hums. The armored leader stood at the obelisk's base, gauntleted hand on a rune panel, his visor reflecting the burgeoning rift's oily shimmer. "Intruders," he intoned, voice amplified through speakers. "Witness the forge." The enforcers advanced, plasma rifles barking volleys that scorched the ice into craters. Terry dove behind a fallen pillar, the shots' heat singeing his hair, while Elara and Lirael fanned out, vines and lightning meeting the onslaught in a clash of sparks and thorns. Tremors escalated, the sanctum's floor cracking as the rift widened, birthing wisps of black corruption that crept toward them like living ink.

Terry's shoulder slammed against the pillar's jagged edge, the blow jarring his elbow and sending a spike of numbness down his arm. He surveyed the sanctum's layout—enforcers spreading out in a loose arc, their exosuits thudding against the ice with each step, breach implants pulsing like infected wounds under armored plates. Two flanked the left conduit, rifles sweeping; a third lumbered right, blocking the path to the obelisk. The central breach gaped wider, its edges fraying into razor-sharp fissures that spat oily tendrils, each one coiling like a serpent tasting the air. Ozone stung his nostrils, mixing with the sharp tang of superheated metal from the enforcers' shots. He gripped his emitter tighter, thumb hovering over the charge selector. Firing blind risked overheating the core—better to draw them in, force a cluster. "Elara, left flank—snare their legs. Lirael, cover high, drop a gale on the stragglers." His voice cut through the gunfire's crackle, low and clipped. Elara nodded, already uncoiling a whip of vines from her gauntlet; they slithered across

the floor, roots burrowing into cracks before erupting in a tangle that snagged the leftmost enforcer's boot. The suit's servos whirred as he stumbled, rifle muzzle flashing wide, a bolt scorching a furrow into the pillar inches from Terry's boot. Lirael, teeth gritted against her rib's fire, raised her arms; wind howled from her palms, whipping ice shards into a stinging barrage that hammered the right enforcer's visor, cracking it and forcing him to stagger back, clawing at the frost glazing his joints. The leader didn't move, fingers dancing over the rune panel. A holographic emitter on his pauldron flickered to life, projecting a shimmering grid above the obelisk—blueprints unfurling like mechanical flowers, conduits of corruption threading through a titanic engine schematic. "The forge awakens," the leader's voice boomed, distorted by static. "Your father's designs were mere sparks. This will ignite realms." The projection zoomed, revealing a chamber deeper below: pulsating heart of the sanctum, where the engine's true core throbbed, guarded by layered conduits and automated sentinels. Coordinates flashed—buried under the glacier's basin, accessible only through the widening breach. Terry's jaw clenched; he recognized fragments of those schematics, echoes of his father's encrypted files. No time to process—he rolled from cover, emitter buzzing as he unleashed a plasma lance. The beam pierced across the sanctum, vaporizing a tendril mid-coil and slamming into the central enforcer's chest plate. Armor bubbled and split, exposing breach conduits that writhed like exposed nerves; the figure convulsed, rifle clattering as he toppled into a crater, steam sizzling from the melt. But the shot drew return fire—bolts chewed the pillar's base, sending chunks of ice raining down, one grazing Terry's thigh and searing cloth into skin. Elara's vines retracted with a wet snap, thorns dripping ichor from the snared enforcer's leg; she pivoted, loosing an arrow tipped with glowing sap that punched through his shoulder joint, locking the arm in a spray of sparks and fluid. "He's bolting the panel—disrupt it!" Lirael wheezed, her gale faltering as pain buckled her stance; she leaned against a conduit, summoning a bolt that arced to the leader's gauntlet. It connected with a thunderclap, the panel sparking and dimming, but the hologram persisted, the leader's visor tilting in what might have been amusement. Tremors bucked the floor, the breach's corruption wisps thickening into a creeping tide that lapped at

their heels, crystallizing boots into brittle prisons. The remaining enforcers pressed, one vaulting a conduit to close the gap, exosuit thrusters flaring blue. Terry weighed options: flank right through the breach's edge, risk the tendrils' grasp, or hold ground and overload a nearby conduit to flood the path. The conduit pulsed invitingly, fat and exposed—tangible leverage. "Conduit on your mark," he bellowed to Elara, who lashed out again, her vines coiling around the advancing enforcer's rifle barrel and yanking it upward. The shot went wild, blasting a vaulted arch overhead; ice groaned and calved, a slab crashing down to pin the figure's legs in a crunch of metal and muffled scream. Lirael's lightning chained to the pinned enforcer, superheating his implants until they burst in geysers of molten slag, the acrid reek of burnt circuits filling the air. Terry darted forward, emitter pressed to the conduit's throbbing surface. Energy surged through the contact, the corruption bubbling and sizzling as it resisted, tendrils lashing at his wrist like heated wires. He gritted through the burn, channeling the overload— the conduit swelled, then ruptured in a fountain of black slurry that splashed across the sanctum, corroding the ice into pitted craters and forcing the last enforcer to recoil, visor fogging from the fumes. The leader wrenched his hand from the panel, the hologram flickering out as he activated a hatch at the obelisk's base. "Follow if you dare—the depths claim the unworthy." He dropped through, the hatch sealing with a hydraulic sizzle, but not before the breach responded, its edges splitting wider into a jagged maw that swallowed the obelisk's lower conduits. Corruption poured upward now, forming deceptive pools that shimmered like solid ground, birthing crystalline spikes that thrust unpredictably. "Down—into the breach," Terry ordered, slinging Lirael's arm over his shoulder; she hissed at the contact, her weight dragging as cracked ribs shifted. Elara led, vines probing the deceptive surface ahead— one step proved false, her boot plunging into a pit of writhing ink that burned like acid, forcing her to haul back with a yelp, skin reddening in blistering patches. They rappelled along the breach's lip using Elara's thorny ropes, the walls slick with frost and oily residue, geothermal bursts erupting from below in scalding plumes that singed hair and blistered exposed flesh. Deeper, the chasm constricted, hallucinatory pitfalls manifesting as solid illusions: phantom platforms that crumbled underfoot, revealing spikes of

crystal that gashed Terry's calf on a misstep, blood welling hot and sticky. He fired a plasma burst to illuminate the way, the light revealing swarms of ice-laced minions—regenerating shards of the echo-beast, scuttling like fractured glass with clicking limbs. One latched onto Lirael's calf, as she pushed forward, its mandibles grinding through her boot leather and puncturing skin; she yelped, the bite sending fire racing up her leg, sinews locking in convulsions that almost folded her knee. She spun, discharging a close-range lightning bolt that charred the creature, its carapace detonating in a burst of molten shards that pelted her thigh like scalding pebbles. Flank 'em—don't let the light snag you, Kael called from the rear, his survivors tossing covering fire that bounced off the crystals, pulverizing a bunch into biting powder. Terry dropped flat, his plasma grid stuttering to life; it surged forward in a lattice of azure blaze, dissolving three scuttlers mid-lunge, their shapes slumping into fizzing pools that corroded the floor. The squad burst into a broader chamber, walls inscribed with luminous runes that throbbed in rhythm with the leader's remote footfalls reverberating like mallet blows. Hallucinatory fire elementals rippled into existence then, whirling funnels of blaze that echoed the conduit radiance, cracking out with whips that scorched without contact, compelling the eye to recoil. One coalesced before Harlan, a raging blaze that shoved him rearward, its heat blistering his bare neck and evaporating beads of sweat on contact. He reeled, sight fuzzing from the mirage's glare, but fired through it, the slugs passed futile yet the elemental hardened mid-stride, cracking a fiery whip that nicked his arm, charring tissue to the bone and freezing his elbow in torment. Lirael scattered it with a tempestweave, gales screaming from her palms to whirl the flames into innocuous swirls, the rebound blast scattering cinders that blistered her cheeks raw. They're baiting us—drawing fire from the real threats, she muttered, her voice laced with reproach as she glanced at Terry's gauntlet. He met her eyes, jaw clenching. Then we adapt. Plasma overload on the cores—Elara, bind the manifests before they solidify. Elara complied, her vines slithering across the floor to entrap a budding elemental, thorns stabbing its phantom heart and ripping it asunder in bursts of fading heat. The team charged onward, rifles crackling in staccato salvos to quell scuttler hordes that surged from the conduits, while Terry's lances

gouged routes through pseudopod thickets, each blow leaving pits of fused glass. At the chamber's core towered an obsidian obelisk, its face laced with the same iridescent fissures as the corruption, inset with a paternal archive node, a crystalline console buzzing with dormant data. Terry edged nearer, gauntlet linking with a snap, holographic schematics unfolding in the air, diagrams for a multiversal weapon, draining volcanic breaches to escalate taint into a chain reaction across realms. The leader's scheme sharpened: tap the pocket's rage to infest Earth with weaponized veins, converting continents into spawning fields. Father's work... twisted, Terry whispered, fingers hovering over the projection. Elara leaned in, her respiration snagging as vines coiled back into her sleeves with a gentle whisper. "Your legacy isn't just blood," she said softly, hand resting on his arm, not in comfort, but a steadying grip. Lirael braced on her staff, respiration labored, the tempestweave's rebound leaving her digits numb and spasming. "Means we strike the origin. No more fleeing." Terry's fingers hovered, a flicker of doubt constricting his chest, but he downloaded the files with a sharp nod. "We use it against them." He wrenched the node free, data flooding his gauntlet with a whir that escalated to a shriek. The obelisk quivered, fissures webbing as a cataclysmic surge detonated, corruption conduits swelling and rupturing in fountains of black oil that splashed across the group. One stream struck a Kael survivor squarely in the torso, the erosion devouring armor and flesh in instants, leaving him wailing as he raked at melting skin before crumpling in spasms. Terry shielded Elara, the splatter striking his back and scorching through his jacket, blistering sinew in a lattice of torment that arched his spine. "Move—deeper core!" Dragging a hobbling squadmate, the chamber fractured, seismic tremors broadening breaches to infernal sub-realms below, where howls swelled like remote thunder. They bolted after the leader, threading a throbbing passage where walls oozed molten droplets, demanding vaults over expanding rifts. Pseudopods cracked anew, one looping around Lirael's ankle and dragging her toward a chasm; she blasted it with lightning, the jolt racing up her leg and deadening her foot, but Elara's vines reeled her clear, the strain ripping fresh lacerations in her palms. The core chamber gaped ahead, a pulsating nexus of conduits funneling toward the leader's escape portal, a churning maelstrom of lava

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to life. He dodged a tendril swipe gouging the wall beside him carving a furrow deep enough to expose glowing innards, the projection bloomed, diagrams of a corruption-weaponizing device, schematics pulsing with forbidden Nexus-weave patterns. His father's signature scrolled across the overlay, intertwined with syndicate codes the armored leader's handiwork, a plot to harness corruption as a multiversal plague. Fingers hovering over the projection, Elara leaned in, her respiration snagging as vines coiled back into her sleeves with a gentle whisper. "Your legacy isn't just blood," she said softly, hand resting on his arm, not in comfort, but a steadying grip. Lirael braced on her staff, respiration labored, the tempestweave's rebound leaving her digits numb and spasming. "Means we strike the origin. No more fleeing." Terry's fingers hovered, a flicker of doubt constricting his chest, but he downloaded the files with a sharp nod. "We use it against them." He wrenched the node free, data flooding his gauntlet with a whir that escalated to a shriek. The obelisk quivered, fissures webbing as a cataclysmic surge detonated, corruption conduits swelling and rupturing in fountains of black oil that splashed across the group. One stream struck a Kael survivor squarely in the torso, the erosion devouring armor and flesh in instants, leaving him wailing as he raked at melting skin before crumpling in spasms. Terry shielded Elara, the splatter striking his back and scorching through his jacket, blistering sinew in a lattice of torment that arched his spine. "Move—deeper core!" Dragging a hobbling squadmate, the chamber fractured, seismic tremors broadening breaches to infernal sub-realms below, where howls swelled like remote thunder. They bolted after the leader, threading a throbbing passage where walls oozed molten droplets, demanding vaults over expanding rifts. Pseudopods cracked anew, one looping around Lirael's ankle and dragging her toward a chasm; she blasted it with lightning, the jolt racing up her leg and deadening her foot, but Elara's vines reeled her clear, the strain ripping fresh lacerations in her palms. The core chamber gaped ahead, a pulsating nexus of conduits funneling toward the leader's escape portal, a churning maelstrom of lava and shadow. Guarding it loomed a titan, a behemoth of jagged basalt fused with coiling taint, its torso a cavern of radiant fissures, arms terminating in magma hammers that dripped embers. It lumbered forward, a tread splintering the floor into a pit that

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The portal's thunderclap echoed in their bones, a visceral jolt that slammed Terry's spine against unyielding ice as they spilled out onto a jagged ledge. Frost crunched under his boots, brittle and treacherous, while the air bit with a chill that clawed into exposed skin. He rolled to his knees, emitter humming hot in his palm, scanning the gloom. Elara landed beside him with

a grunt, her vines retracting into coiled bracers, leaves singed black from the prior blaze. Lirael hit last, her body crumpling as the tether snapped free; she clutched her side, breath hitching in shallow gasps, the electrocution's aftershocks twitching her fingers. "Status," Terry barked, voice rough from the void's squeeze, ignoring the throb in his snapped finger as he flexed his gauntlet. No time for pain—scans flickered across his visor: rift energies spiking, structural integrity fracturing ahead. Elara pushed to her feet, bow already nocked with a herbal-tipped arrow, her free hand pressing Lirael's shoulder. "She's fading. That last surge fried half her conduits." Her eyes narrowed at the chasm yawning below, steam hissing from geothermal cracks that webbed the walls like veins of fire. Lirael waved her off, stormweave flickering erratically around her knuckles, but her stance wobbled. "Keep moving. Beast's echo will track the nexus pull." A wet cough rattled her chest, frost glazing her lips—internal frostbite from the realm's backlash, no doubt. The ledge trembled, a low rumble building from the depths. Terry's emitter whined, charging a plasma lance. "Fissure's widening. We push down—seal what we can en route." He didn't wait for nods, leaping to a lower outcrop, boots scraping for purchase as shards calved into the abyss. They descended in tandem, the chasm constricting like a throat, walls glistening with oily Riftblight that pulsed in sync with their heartbeats. Geothermal bursts erupted sporadically, gouts of superheated vapor scalding the air with sulfur and char. Elara led, her arrows whistling to ignite crystalline protrusions—shafts blooming into fiery thorns that cracked the growths, sending molten drips sizzling onto the path below. A screech pierced the din, echoing from the murk. The echo-beast's form coalesced in pursuit: a hulking silhouette of refracted ice and shadow, limbs regenerating in jagged spurs, spawning minions that skittered like frost-laced scorpions along the walls. One lunged, pincer clamping Terry's calf through his suit; agony flared as it pierced alloy, venom seeping to numb muscle and lock his knee. He twisted, firing a plasma lance point-blank—the bolt vaporized the appendage in a steam hiss, but the recoil shoved him against the wall, shoulder blade grinding on crystal that flaked away, embedding shards in his joint. "Flank it high!" Elara called, her voice taut, leaping to a protruding shelf. Vines lashed out, thorny coils wrapping

a minion's thorax, yanking it into a steam vent where it burst in a spray of supercooled shards that peppered her back like hail, bruising ribs and drawing blood through her cloak. Lirael channeled a surge, lightning arcing from her palms to chain across three scuttlers; the bolts hammered them into the ice, craters smoking, but the effort buckled her knees. She staggered, a pursuing tendril grazing her arm—flesh blistering instantly from the blight's touch, swelling red and raw, forcing her to bite down on a scream that came out as a hiss. They pressed deeper, the beast's bulk scraping the walls, dislodging boulders that tumbled past in thunderous rolls. Terry's visor pinged: holographic interference ahead. "Transmission—intercept it." He vaulted a fissure, emitter syncing to a floating data node bobbing in the steam. The projection flickered to life mid-stride, the armored leader's visor glaring from the haze. "... final site primed. Engine ignition in minutes—blight will cascade through the veins, binding realms to our forge." Static warped the feed, but coordinates etched in Terry's HUD: the sanctum core, nexus heart of this sub-realm. Elara's eyes flashed accusation. "Your father's blueprints— they're fueling this. We overload the site, or it spreads." Her vines retracted with a snap, betraying the tension in her grip. Terry's jaw tightened, but he nodded curtly. "Then we race. Node's our bottleneck—collapse it behind us." No retort; the beast's roar drowned debate, its hammer-limb smashing down, shattering the ledge into a cascade of ice blocks that battered Lirael's legs, one chunk cracking her shin with a audible snap that dropped her to one knee, breath exploding in pained bursts. They funneled into a narrowing vein, hallucinatory pitfalls blooming like mirages: false floors of blooming meadows that dissolved into spiked pits. Terry's shield deployed, kinetic pulse shattering an illusionary swarm of phantom insects that solidified mid-air, their stings lancing his forearm before plasma grid vaporized them in acrid bursts. The ozone tang mixed with the chasm's burnt-sugar reek, coating his throat. Elara dodged a crystalline trap, jaws of ice snapping shut inches from her heel; she countered with an incendiary arrow, flames erupting to melt the mechanism, but the backlash heat blistered her palms, skin peeling in white strips that she ignored, nocking another shaft. Lirael limped, lightning flickering to repel a tendril that coiled toward her ankle— the strike severed it, but feedback jolted her core, vision blurring as

nausea roiled her gut from the strain. The vein-node loomed: a throbbing bulb of blight-veined crystal, pulsing with the beast's approach. Terry slammed his emitter against it, runes interfacing in a cascade of code. "Overload sequence—now!" Plasma surged into the conduits, superheating the lattice. Elara bound the node's base with roots, thorns piercing to anchor, while Lirael's gale funneled lightning into the cracks, bolts forking to amplify the charge. The node swelled, fissures glowing white-hot, then detonated in a concussive wave. Shrapnel whipped through the air, one fragment gouging Terry's thigh deep enough to grind against bone, forcing a limp as blood welled hot. The blast wave hurled Elara backward, slamming her into the wall—elbow hyperextending with a pop that locked her arm at an awkward angle, pain radiating like fire. Lirael braced against the surge, but a flying shard clipped her temple, splitting skin and filling her mouth with the coppery flood of blood, disorienting her as the world tilted. The collapse thundered: walls caving in avalanches of ice and stone, burying the beast's vanguard under tons of rubble that shook the fissure like an earthquake. Pursuing roars muffled to gurgles, then silence—sealed, for now. They clawed forward through the settling dust, emerging into the vast glacial sanctum: a cavernous dome of vaulted ice, veins of Riftblight threading the ceiling like corrupted arteries, feeding into the blight engine at the center—a colossal obelisk of fused metal and crystal, humming with multiversal strain. Tremors rattled the floor, cracks spidering outward as a burgeoning rift yawned at its base, edges shimmering with oily void. Enforcers guarded the perimeter: exosuit brutes in armored hulks, rifles trained, their leader's silhouette barking orders from the engine's dais. "Intruders—contain and purge!" Plasma fire lanced toward them, bolts scorching the air with ozone bite. Terry dove behind an ice pillar, shield flaring to absorb a volley that cracked the barrier, vibrations jarring his teeth loose in his jaw. "Flank the enforcers—engine's the priority!" He fired back, lance coring one's shoulder plate, armor melting to expose flesh that blistered and smoked. Elara rolled left, arrow loosing to ignite an enforcer's boot—flames blooming with binding tendrils that yanked him off-balance, rifle clattering as he thrashed, but a counter-shot grazed her hip, the impact spinning her into a skid that abraded skin raw against gravel, fresh blood slicking her side. Lirael

summoned a tempest, winds howling to deflect incoming rounds, pellets ricocheting with metallic pings, but the effort tore at her wounds, shin throbbing with every shift, forcing her to lean on the wall as lightning forked toward the group, chaining across two suits in explosive arcs that hurled them back, breastplates crumpling inward to crush ribs with audible crunches. The leader raised a gauntlet, engine whining higher, rift expanding with a groan that vibrated the sanctum's core. Minions spawned from the edges—ice-laced horrors slithering forward, claws screeching on stone. Terry charged a grid, emitter overheating in his grip, blisters rising on his palm from the strain. Elara's vines surged toward the obelisk, thorns questing for conduits, while Lirael's gales built to a crescendo, air crackling with impending storm. The enforcers closed in, boots pounding, and Terry met their advance head-on, plasma blooming in a defensive lattice that singed the air, the heat wave forcing a step back as the rift's pull tugged at their forms like invisible hooks.

The enforcer's boot thudded over shattered tile, shards of superheated tile hissing as they met armored plating. Terry twisted his emitter, redirecting a plasma thread to whip across the intruder's visor—glass fracturing with a sharp crack, sparks erupting from exposed wiring that sent the brute staggering, fingers clawing at his faceplate as circuits fried and smoked. Elara gritted her teeth, blood from her hip seeping through her fingers where she pressed a makeshift compress of frost-kissed cloth. She nocked another arrow, the shaft buzzing as her will infused it with verdant fury—thorns erupting along its length like barbs on a whip. The shot arced low, punching into an enforcer's knee joint with a wet thud, vines exploding outward to coil around servos, grinding metal until pistons seized and the suit locked rigid, toppling the man inside with a bellowed curse that reverberated off the vaulted ice. "Keep them pinned—breach's widening!" Lirael bellowed, her voice ragged over the tempest's roar. She slammed her palm against the sanctum wall, drawing from the geothermal vents below; static leaped from her skin, coiling into jagged forks that leaped across the chamber. One bolt struck an enforcer's rifle mid-burst, the weapon detonating in a bloom of shrapnel—barrels warping, casings spraying like hot gravel to pepper the air and gouge furrows in the tile floor.

The man screamed as fragments tore through his suit's seams, blood blooming dark against the white plating, but he lunged forward anyway, gauntlet swinging in a haymaker that clipped Lirael's shoulder, the impact jarring her bones and sending her sprawling into a skid that scraped bark-like welts across her arm. Terry's shield flickered under the strain, its kinetic buzz faltering as another volley hammered it—bolts slamming home with concussive thuds that rattled his ribs like drumbeats. He countered with a braced shot, plasma lancing true to vaporize an enforcer's arm at the elbow, the limb sloughing away in a sizzle of cauterized meat and molten alloy, the stump spraying arcs of fluid that sizzled on the ground. The breach groaned louder, its edges pulsing with that oily black shimmer, tendrils of corruption snaking out like questing roots to latch onto a fallen enforcer's boot. The man thrashed, his leg twisting unnaturally as taint seeped in—skin bubbling into crystalline spikes that pierced his suit from within, a choked gurgle escaping as his struggles slowed to rigid stillness. The leader pivoted on the dais, his armored form silhouetted against the obelisk's glow, gauntlet clenching as he channeled a surge into the engine. Holographic emitters flared to life along the sanctum's walls, projecting his voice in a distorted boom that sliced through the din. "Fools. You chase projections while the true Sundering awakens. Witness the convergence—your father's legacy, perfected." The projection shifted, revealing schematics of a sprawling lattice beneath the academy, conduits of taint threading toward a distant spire on Earth's fractured crust. Activation runes pulsed in sequence, coordinates locking onto a hidden vault in the wastelands beyond Eldergard. Elara's eyes narrowed, her free hand twisting a vine into a taut lash that snapped toward the hologram, shattering the emitter in a spray of sparks and frozen shards. "That's no legacy—it's a plague factory. Shut it down, Terry, or it'll rip the realms apart!" Terry's jaw clenched, emitter whirring as he calibrated a wider grid. The revelation hit like a gut punch—his father's notes, twisted into this monstrosity—but he shoved it down, focusing on the enforcer barreling toward him, rifle chattering rounds that chewed craters into his cover. He rolled aside, the tile splintering under the barrage, and fired a charged bolt that bored through the brute's chest plate, ribs cracking audibly as superheated gas expanded within, hurling the body backward in

a crumple of twisted metal and steaming viscera. Lirael hauled herself up, shin screaming with each pivot, and unleashed a gale that scooped debris into a maelstrom—jagged tile and enforcer casings whipping like flail weights to batter the closing ranks. One suit crumpled under the onslaught, helmet caving with a resonant gong, the occupant slumping lifeless as blood trickled from vents. But the effort drained her; nausea roiled in her gut, a hallucinatory wave crashing over her senses—phantom screams echoing in her ears, the air thickening with the acrid tang of burning flesh that wasn't there, her vision blurring as if frostbite clawed at her eyes. She shook it off, knees buckling briefly before she lashed out with a lightning whip that coiled around an enforcer's throat, arcs jumping to char the seals and drop him in convulsing heaps, throat blackened and raw. The breach belched a fresh spawn: ice-laced horrors uncoiling from its maw, their forms serpentine with crystalline barbs that scraped furrows in the floor as they slithered forward. One lunged at Elara, barbs raking her thigh in a rake of fire that tore fabric and flesh, blood welling hot and immediate. She retaliated with a point-blank arrow, the projectile burrowing into its core before erupting in a tangle of thorns that shredded the beast from within, ichor spraying in viscous ropes that froze mid-air into brittle spikes. "Vein-node—there, by the dais!" Terry shouted, spotting the pulsing artery of taint feeding the obelisk, its surface throbbing with inner light. He sprinted forward, shield absorbing a grazing shot that scorched his sleeve, the fabric charring to his skin in stinging patches. Enforcers pivoted to intercept, boots thudding in unison, but Elara's vines lashed out like living chains, ensnaring two at the ankles and yanking them into a collision that dented plating and snapped limbs with wet pops. Lirael limped after, summoning a burst of wind to propel herself, the force pressing against her wounds like icy fingers probing bruises. She reached the node first, hands glowing as she wove storm threads into its surface—electricity arcing deep, the vein convulsing in response, black ooze bubbling up to etch burns across her palms. The echo-beast's roar echoed from the fissure behind, its regenerating bulk clawing closer, minions spilling out in a chittering wave that forced Terry to divide his fire: plasma carving through crystalline hides, each hit exploding them into shards that pelted like hail, embedding in walls and flesh alike. The leader laughed,

a metallic rasp over the engine's whine. "Your weaves are child's play. The engine fuses it all—taint and nexus, realms into one." He slammed his gauntlet down, the obelisk shuddering as conduits flared brighter, the breach dilating with a seismic groan that buckled the floor. Cracks raced outward, swallowing an enforcer whole; his scream cut short as the void claimed him, edges grinding bone to paste. Terry reached the node, emitter pressed flush against its pulsing hide. "Elara, bind it—Lirael, surge on my mark!" He poured energy in, plasma infiltrating the vein like liquid fire, the structure heating to incandescence, steam hissing from fissures as taint boiled within. Elara's thorns wrapped tight, squeezing until the node warped, thorns piercing deep to anchor the assault. Lirael's lightning chained in, the combined force erupting in a chain reaction—veins rupturing in explosive bursts that showered the sanctum with superheated sludge, melting tile into steaming pools that scalded feet and dissolved armor straps. The enforcers faltered, suits sparking from the overload's feedback, rifles jamming as circuits fried. One fired wildly, bolt scorching Terry's arm in a line of blistering pain, but he held firm, grid expanding to envelop the dais. The leader recoiled, his silhouette blurring as the breach's pull intensified, hooks of void snagging at cloaks and limbs, dragging a minion into the maw where it dissolved in oily wisps. Tremors escalated, the sanctum's ceiling fracturing with resonant booms, chunks of tile plummeting to crater the floor and bury a horror mid-lunge. The echo-beast breached the fissure fully, colossal maw gaping, frost-laced fangs dripping with crystalline venom that sizzled on contact. Its claw slammed down, shattering a pillar into debris that rained like boulders, forcing the trio to scatter—Elara diving into a crevasse that singed her palms on hot stone, Lirael rolling aside as the impact bruised her ribs anew, Terry's shield cracking under a glancing blow that numbed his shoulder. The leader activated a secondary panel, engine stabilizing with a hateful buzz, breach edges stabilizing into a stable tear that birthed more minions—towering forms with blades of frozen taint. But the vein-node's collapse rippled outward, conduits on the obelisk dimming, the holographic schematics flickering as the activation stuttered. Elara rose, arrow drawn, her hip a throbbing fire that made her stance waver. "It's weakening—hit the core!" Lirael nodded, summoning a gale that hurled enforcer fire back

at them, rounds embedding in their own ranks with meaty impacts. Terry charged his emitter to overload, plasma coiling like a serpent ready to strike. The beast's roar drowned the chaos, its bulk surging forward, ground quaking under the assault. A new tremor split the dais, and from the breach's heart, something larger stirred—claws like scythes scraping against reality's edge.

Chapter 21: Scythe-Clawed Awakening

Ice splintered like brittle bone under the scythe-clawed entity's first convulsion, its form ripping free from the engine's ruptured core in a spray of oily shards that skittered across the sanctum floor. The abomination loomed, a hulking silhouette twice the height of the rune-carved pillars, its hide a patchwork of frozen blight—jagged crystals fused with pulsating veins of black ichor that wept a viscous fluid, filling the air with the acrid tang of ozone laced with charred caramel. Each scythe-blade arm, elongated and serrated with crystallized corruption, dragged furrows through the glacial stone, leaving behind trails where the rock softened into fleshy ridges, bubbling and reforming in grotesque twitches. Terry skidded to a halt behind a toppled console, his emitter humming in his grip as he scanned the beast's underbelly for weak points. The left flank pulsed with exposed conduits, glowing faintly blue amid the blight's advance, but reaching it meant crossing an open stretch slick with melting frost and pseudopod remnants. He weighed the dodge—roll left toward the steam vent for cover, or fire a probing lance right to test its reflexes—knowing a missed shot could draw those blades sweeping low. Elara crouched beside him, her fingers digging into the permafrost, coaxing thorny roots to snake upward from hidden fissures, while Lirael braced against a pillar, her hands crackling with building charge, eyes flicking between the entity's core and the nearest exit archway clogged with debris. The beast's head— a malformed knot of horns and crystalline facets—swiveled, and it unleashed a guttural rasp that echoed like cracking thunder. One scythe arm whipped forward, not at them directly, but carving a gash in the air that birthed a hallucinatory slash: Terry's vision blurred as phantom blades seemed to rake his skin, drawing illusory lines of fire across his

arm that burned real enough to make his muscles seize. He bit down hard, tasting blood, and shoved the emitter forward, unleashing a grid of superheated plasma arcs that sizzled into the entity's nearest limb. The beams struck true, melting a section of crystal into slag that dripped like molten tar, but the abomination only reared, its regenerative core—a throbbing orb nestled in its chest—flaring with inner light as fresh blight knit the damage, the air humming with wet, sucking sounds. "Bind the joints!" Terry barked, pivoting to the right despite the risk, his boots crunching over shattered ice as he fired another lance to pin the beast's advance. The plasma bolt exploded against a knee, vaporizing blight but sending shards flying; one grazed his shoulder, tearing fabric and drawing a hot line of blood that froze almost instantly in the chill. Elara nodded sharply, her jaw set in a grim line, and thrust her palms outward. Thorny vines erupted from the ground in a tangle of barbed coils, thicker than ropes and tipped with venomous thorns that glistened with sap. They lashed toward the entity's elbow joint, wrapping tight and yanking with a creak of straining crystal. The abomination staggered, its free scythe hacking downward to sever the growths, but not before the vines drew oily fluid from the wounds, the blight hissing as it corroded the plant matter into blackened sludge. Elara winced, a bead of sweat tracing her temple, but she poured more energy in, the roots multiplying to ensnare the other arm, forcing the beast to thrash against its bonds. Lirael seized the opening, her fingers splaying wide as she summoned a tempest from the sanctum's swirling winds. Bolts of lightning chained from her hands, forking into the core with deafening cracks that lit the chamber in stark blue flashes. The impacts charred the orb's surface, sending sparks of blight scattering like embers, and the entity bellowed—a sound that vibrated through the ice, cracking fissures in the walls. But the hallucinatory assault redoubled; Lirael gasped, clutching her head as phantom screams pierced her ears, visions of storm-torn villages overlaying the sanctum, making her stagger. She shook it off with a snarl, channeling the pain into a fiercer surge that arced across the beast's hide, disrupting the regeneration in bursts of steam. The entity buckled under the combined assault, its scythes flailing wildly. One blade clipped a pillar, shearing it in half and sending chunks of ice plummeting; Terry dove left this time, the

debris slamming into his previous position and spraying frostbite-numbing powder across his legs. He tasted the metallic bite of fear but pushed it down, scrambling toward a cluster of conduits snaking from the engine's base—overloaded relics still flickering with residual power. "Console—now!" he called, slamming his emitter against the nearest panel. Data streams flooded his visor: schematics of a fusion ritual, the armored leader's blueprint for merging the blight with multiversal engines, twisting stable nexuses into weapons of endless corruption. Elara's vines held, but the strain showed in her gritted teeth as the abomination's core pulsed brighter, pseudopods bubbling up from the floor like boils bursting skin. The things writhed free—limbless horrors of elongated flesh tipped with sucking maws, slithering toward them with slurping trails that melted the ice into foul puddles. Lirael redirected a lightning fork, electrocuting a cluster into charred husks that popped and sizzled, releasing puffs of burnt-sugar smoke. But more spawned, and from the engine's cracks, elementals coalesced: swirling vortices of frost and steam that howled as they solidified into whipping tendrils. The sanctum groaned, foundations fracturing under the entity's weight as it tore free of the vines with a snap, blight shards embedding in Elara's arm and drawing a hiss from her lips—fresh gashes weeping blood that froze in crimson icicles. Terry yanked the download, the console sparking in protest, and fired a plasma grid overhead to collapse a ceiling section onto the pseudopods, burying them under tons of glacial rubble that avalanched with a roar. The impact shook the chamber, steam vents erupting in searing gouts that blistered exposed skin, forcing Lirael to leap back, her cloak singed at the edges. Through the haze, they spotted the armored leader— a shadowed figure in powered exosuit—bolting toward a widening rift at the far wall, the tear pulsing with multiversal distortions, edges fraying like torn fabric. "After him!" Terry growled, sealing the downloaded data into his emitter's core. He charged forward, lancing plasma at the elementals in his path; the bolts vaporized one vortex into harmless mist, but another grazed him, frosting his gauntlet and numbing his fingers. Elara summoned a barrier of interwoven roots to shield their flank, the wood creaking as pseudopods battered it, while Lirael hurled tempests that scattered the swarms, her breaths coming in ragged bursts amid the chaos. They sealed minor breaches

along the way—Terry's energy lattice fusing a small tear with a hiss of contained power, Elara's vines plugging another with thorny plugs that withered the blight—but the entity's thrash had destabilized the air itself. A final hallucinatory wave hit: Terry saw the leader multiply into phantoms, each mocking with a distorted laugh that clawed at his eardrums, but he focused on the real silhouette, the one leaving bootprints in the ichor-slick floor. The rift yawned wider, sucking in debris with a vacuum whine, and the leader vanished through. The trio plunged after, Terry's hand clamping Elara's wrist to steady her leap, Lirael's stormweave propelling them forward in a gust. They tumbled out into a volatile sub-realm, the ground a jagged mosaic of volcanic fissures belching sulfurous heat, the air thick with ash that stung their wounds. Distant roars echoed from the rift's fading echo—the scythe-clawed horror, not fully slain, its regenerative core stirring remnants into pursuit. Terry rolled to his feet, emitter raised against the encroaching shadows, as a fissure cracked open beneath them, forcing a desperate scramble across crumbling basalt. Lirael unleashed a gale to bridge the gap, her vines lashing out to anchor their crossing, while pseudopod echoes slithered from the rock, their maws gaping in the dim glow.

Terry's boots skidded on the brittle basalt as the fissure widened with a guttural crack, belching acrid fumes that clawed at his throat. He pivoted, emitter humming in his grip, and fired a plasma lance straight into the nearest pseudopod echo—a writhing stump of blight-veined flesh that burst in a spray of sizzling ichor, its remnants splattering across the rock like molten tar. The impact scorched a shallow crater into the ground, edges glowing orange before cooling to blackened glass. But more pseudopods erupted from the fissures, their bulbous tips splitting into fanged maws that snapped at the air, forcing him to weigh his next move: leap right toward a steam vent that might scald him raw, or hold the line and risk the ground swallowing him whole. Elara released her vine anchors with a sharp twist of her wrist, the tendrils retracting into her gauntlets with a whip-crack, coiling back like serpents sloughing shed skin. She dropped beside him, bow already drawn, and loosed an arrow tipped with entangling thorns; it pierced a pseudopod's core, roots exploding

outward to pin it wriggling against the stone, thorns grinding through its hide with wet crunches. Her jaw tightened, eyes flicking to the widening gap—jumping it meant exposing her back to the slitherers, but staying invited the pseudopods to swarm. She chose the risk, vaulting forward with a grunt, her free hand scraping raw against jagged lava rock as she landed on the far lip. Lirael landed last, her stormweave cuffs sparking with residual charge, the gale she'd summoned dissipating in eddies that scattered ash like gray snow. She staggered, one knee buckling from the earlier frostbite gnawing at her joints, but she barked a command to the winds, channeling a bolt from her cuff that arced into a cluster of pseudopods. The lightning fork split their forms in explosive bursts, charring flesh to brittle husks that crumbled underfoot, leaving behind a scorched furrow reeking of ozone and charred meat. Her fingers flexed against the pain shooting up her leg—push through the fissure now, or waste energy blasting more echoes and let the leader widen his lead? The roar from the fading rift decided for her; it vibrated through the stone, closer than before, urging her to scramble after Elara. They pressed on across the fractured plain, the sub-realm's volcanic underbelly groaning like a beast rousing from slumber. Fissures spiderwebbed outward, spewing gouts of superheated steam that blistered the air, and Terry's numbed fingers fumbled the emitter's calibration, forcing him to holster it briefly and shake blood back into his hand. The armored leader's silhouette flickered ahead, a armored blur navigating the lava fields with boosted strides, his exosuit's thrusters leaving trails of ionized exhaust. Terry scanned the terrain: a ridge of cooled obsidian to the left offered cover but sloped toward a bubbling magma pool; straight ahead lay open ground pocked with pseudopod nests. He opted for the ridge, signaling with a curt gesture, his lips curling in a tight snarl at the leader's retreating form—arrogance be damned, he'd drag those blueprints from the bastard's core if it meant cauterizing this blight at the source. Elara flanked left, her steps light despite the ash caking her boots, drawing another arrow as a pseudopod burst from a crevice to her right. She sidestepped its lunge, the maw grazing her cloak and tearing fabric with a hiss, then drove the arrow into its base; vines surged forth, wrapping and crushing it inward until it imploded in a gush of viscous fluid that pooled and hardened into jagged spikes.

Her breath hitched at the sting on her arm—fabric torn meant skin exposed to the sulfur, but she pressed the ridge's edge, eyes locked on the leader's path. A minor breach shimmered there, a hairline tear in reality leaking oily Riftblight that dribbled like ink across the basalt. She knelt, palms pressing into the earth, and coaxed roots from the scorched soil—twisted, heat-warped things that she fused into the tear, the vines sizzling as they plugged the leak with a pop of contained pressure, blight crystallizing harmlessly along their lengths. Lirael covered their advance, her cuffs flaring as she summoned a whirlwind to buffet a trio of pseudopods slithering up the ridge. The gale hurled them tumbling into a fissure, where they thrashed and dissolved in the heat below, the wind's howl masking her labored wheeze. Frostbite clawed deeper into her limbs, but she ignored it, focusing on the leader's trail—bootprints etched in cooling lava, leading toward a cluster of jagged spires that vented crimson glows. A hallucinatory flicker assaulted her then: the spires twisted into mocking faces, whispering taunts that buzzed like insects in her skull. She clenched her teeth, channeling the distraction into fury, and unleashed a lightning chain that leaped from spire to spire, shattering illusory veils and grounding the energy in explosive cracks that pulverized stone into gravel cascades. The distant roar swelled, shaking pebbles loose from the ridge, and Terry glanced back as a shadow loomed through the fading rift portal—a remnant of the scythe-clawed entity, its colossal form partially manifested, blades of crystallized blight scraping against the sub-realm's veil like nails on slate. One scythe-arm thrust through, gouging a furrow in the basalt twenty paces wide, shards flying like shrapnel that peppered Elara's barrier. Terry's mind raced: divert to seal the partial emergence, risking the leader's escape, or maintain pursuit and let the abomination trail them into vulnerability? The tangible goal burned clear—intercept the leader before he fused those schematics into whatever ritual core waited ahead. He raised his emitter, recalibrating mid-stride to amplify output, and loosed a plasma grid: threads of superheated energy wove into a net that lashed the protruding scythe, melting layers of crystal in cascading droplets that hissed into steam. The arm recoiled with a screech, retracting partially, but not before its tip slashed the air, carving a gash in Terry's shoulder pauldron that sparked and smoked. Elara reinforced her barrier,

roots thickening into a bulwark that absorbed the shrapnel, wood splintering but holding as she nocked an arrow laced with herbal accelerant. She fired it into the partial rift, the tip burrowing deep; flames erupted along the vines, cauterizing the edges with a roar of incinerated blight, the tear contracting in fits of crackling fire that lit the ash-choked air. Her fingers dug into the soil for stability, nails breaking against rock—the abomination's pursuit meant endless swarms, but halting now invited total overrun. She rose, wiping sweat-stung eyes, and dashed after Terry toward the spires. Lirael followed, her stormweave propelling her in bursts that singed the ground behind, but a pseudopod ambush from a side fissure caught her off-guard—one coiled around her ankle, yanking her toward the magma's glow. She twisted mid-fall, slamming a cuff against the tendril; lightning surged through it, electrocuting the length until it spasmed and released in a charred coil, the backlash jolting her muscles into numbness. She rolled free, scorched boot sole peeling away to reveal blistered skin, and hurled a tempest at the nest—winds sheared the cluster apart, flinging segments into the heat where they ignited like fuses, explosions blooming in staccato bursts that collapsed the fissure's lip. The leader crested the spires, vanishing into a shadowed crevasse where volcanic light pulsed erratically, and Terry accelerated, emitter venting heat in rhythmic puffs. They closed the distance, sealing two more breaches en route—Terry's lattice fusing one with a web of contained plasma that hummed and sealed with a vacuum seal, Elara's thorns plugging another into inert crystal. But the scythe-clawed remnant bellowed again, the sound warping the air into pressure waves that bowled them forward, cracking the ridge beneath. Pseudopods swarmed in its wake, slithering from new fissures, and hallucinatory slashes manifested as solid blades whipping from the haze— one grazed Lirael's side, drawing a line of blood that froze in the sulfur chill. Terry ducked a phantom edge, the air whistling past his ear, and countered with a kinetic shield that bloomed from his emitter, the force field shimmering blue as it deflected the next strike, sending vibrations up his arm that jarred his teeth. Elara bound a real pseudopod mid-lunge, vines crushing its form into pulp that sprayed across her legs, while Lirael dispersed a cluster with a gale that pinned them writhing against spire walls, lightning forks finishing them in pops of superheated vapor. They breached

the crevasse's mouth, the ground sloping into a cavernous hollow where lava rivers snaked through obsidian channels, the armored leader silhouetted at a central obelisk—his hands interfacing with glowing runes, the air thickening with multiversal strain. But the abomination's roar peaked, the rift behind them tearing wider, and a full scythe-claw erupted through, slamming down to fracture the cavern floor in a quake that hurled boulders skyward. Terry braced against the tremor, emitter locking onto the claw's joint—plasma lances would sever it, but the recoil might topple him into the lava; vines from Elara could bind first, buying time. He signaled her with a sharp nod, lips pressed thin in grim focus, as the pursuit devolved into frenzy amid the crumbling foundations. Elara lashed out with thorny coils, wrapping the claw's base, the vines straining with creaks as blight crystals ground against them, while Lirael summoned a tempest to channel lightning into the bind, arcs dancing across the surface in blinding flares.

Terry's emitter whined to life, the plasma lance streaking from its barrel like a comet's tail, superheated blue-white energy slamming into the bound joint. The claw shuddered, crystals fracturing with a screech like tearing metal, shards exploding outward in a hail that pinged off his kinetic shield. The impact jolted his shoulders, numbing his fingers where they gripped the device, but the limb held—barely—vines splintering under the strain as the abomination yanked back, dragging Elara forward a step. She dug her heels into the fractured obsidian, jaw set, and reinforced the coils with a fresh surge, thorns blooming thicker, piercing the blight-fused flesh beneath the crystals. Black ichor oozed from the wounds, bubbling on the hot stone with a sizzle that filled the air with acrid ozone and the sickly sweet char of burnt sugar. Lirael thrust her arms wide, the tempest coiling tighter around the lightning arcs, the electricity hammering the claw's core in rhythmic pulses that made the air hum and crackle. "Pin it harder—I'll fry the base!" she barked, her voice cutting through the din, eyes flicking to Elara with a nod that spoke of calculated trust in the bind's hold. The armored leader spun at the obelisk, his gauntleted fists pounding runes that flared crimson, the structure groaning as multiversal strain warped the cavern's edges—walls buckling inward, lava rivers surging

higher in response. Terry ignored him for the moment, pivoting to rake another lance across the claw's underside, melting a swath of crystallized blight into slag that dripped molten into the channels below, steaming violently. The abomination's full form heaved upward then, the scythe-clawed entity birthing itself from the widening rift behind, a hulking mass of twisted limbs and pulsating veins erupting through the tear like a nightmare uncoiling from stone. Its body was a grotesque fusion: jagged blades of oily black crystal protruding from tumorous swells of flesh-metal hybrid, the surface rippling with wet, crackling sounds as Riftblight coursed through it, reshaping segments into barbed protrusions mid-thrash. The entity lashed out, a hallucinatory slash manifesting as a razor-edged pseudopod that whipped from the haze, solidifying mid-swing to carve a furrow in the ground near Terry's boot. He leaped aside, the edge grazing his calf, tearing fabric and drawing a shallow gash that burned like acid—his leg buckled momentarily, forcing him to catch himself on a jutting rock, the jolt sending a spike of pain up his spine. Elara rolled clear of a real scythe sweep, the blade embedding in the cavern floor with a thunderous crack, sending tremors that loosened boulders from the ceiling; one plummeted toward her, and she deflected it with a whip of vines that splintered the stone into gravel, the debris rattling across her armored pauldrons like hail. "Flank the core—it's regenerating!" Terry called, his tone clipped as he adjusted his emitter's output, the device growing scalding in his palm. He disliked relying on their weaves, but the precision of plasma needed the setup; Elara's glance toward him was sharp, her fingers flexing on her bowstring as if weighing the risk of her vines snapping under the load. Lirael channeled a gale that hurled pseudopods back into the rift, the wind howling through the chamber and whipping embers from the lava into fiery tracers. She struck next, lightning forking from her tempest to hammer the entity's exposed underbelly, the bolts exploding against blight veins in bursts of vaporized ichor that splattered the walls, corroding obsidian into pitted, fleshy ridges. The impact rocked the beast, its roars distorting the air into concussive waves that slammed into Lirael's chest, knocking the breath from her lungs and leaving her coughing, ribs aching with each heave as she staggered but held her stance. The entity thrashed, scythes carving arcs that shattered stalactites overhead, raining

shards that clattered and embedded in the ground like caltrops. Terry exploited the opening, deploying a plasma grid—a lattice of searing lines that bloomed from his emitter, enveloping the bound joint. The energy web constricted with a hiss, superheating the crystals until they popped and liquefied, the claw severing in a gush of steaming fluid that flooded a lava channel, hissing into temporary quiescence. But the beast adapted, a new limb bubbling up from its torso, blades unfurling with a grotesque squelch, the Riftblight's corruption audibly knitting flesh to rusted metal reinforcements drawn from the cavern's depths. Elara bound the emerging scythe at its root, thorns digging deep, her arms trembling from the effort—sweat beading on her brow despite the chill drafts seeping from the rift. "These binds won't last if you don't cauterize faster," she said, voice steady but edged, her free hand gesturing toward a nearby conduit pulsing with rune-light, a tactical pivot toward the obelisk. Lirael nodded, unleashing a tempest that disrupted the regenerative core at the entity's chest—a throbbing mass of crystallized blight that pulsed with inner light. Lightning chains whipped across it, cracking the surface and exposing raw, writhing veins beneath; the shockwave from the strikes buckled the sanctum's ferrocrete arches, chunks plummeting to crater the floor and force the trio to weave through the debris. One fragment clipped Elara's shoulder, the blunt force spinning her half-around and bruising the muscle, her arm hanging numb for a beat before she shook it out, vines loosening momentarily. Terry sprinted to the conduit Elara had indicated, emitter interfacing with a jack-in, data streaming into his wrist slate—schematics unfolding in holographic flickers: the armored leader's final fusion ritual, blueprints for harvesting Aetherium through rift conduits, siphoning Sundering energies to arm a syndicate fleet. "Got it—the ritual's tying the engine to multiversal veins," he muttered, fingers dancing over controls to overload the node. The conduit erupted in a chain reaction, sparks flying as energy backlashed, summoning swarms of pseudopod minions from the obelisk's base—slithering horrors that lashed out with acidic tips, one coiling around Lirael's ankle and yanking her off-balance. She gasped as it burned through her boot, the chemical sear blistering skin and forcing her to slash it free with a wind blade that bisected the appendage, the severed end twitching and spraying corrosive fluid that ate

into the ice-laced stone. Elementals coalesced from the steam vents—vortexes of searing heat and frost that howled through the chamber, one slamming into Terry's shield and overloading it in a burst of feedback that deafened him temporarily, a shrill ring piercing his ears amid the chaos. He shook his head, vision blurring, and fired blindly, plasma bolts vaporizing a pseudopod cluster in explosive pops that showered the air with superheated mist, scalding his exposed neck. The entity bellowed, cracking the sanctum's foundations further—ferrocrete groaning as fissures spiderwebbed outward, steam vents erupting in geysers that scalded the air. Pseudopods swarmed thicker, one pseudopod whipping Elara's thigh, the impact hurling her against a wall where she hit with a thud that winded her, breath ragged as she pushed off, ribs protesting with sharp twinges. Lirael dispersed an elemental with a gale-force counter, the winds scattering it into harmless eddies, but frostbite nipped at her fingertips from the backlash chill, numbing her draw. The armored leader bolted then, activating the obelisk with a final rune-slam; a newly torn rift yawned behind him, edges shimmering with oily black. Terry sealed a minor breach en route—a lattice fusing it shut with a contained plasma web that hummed and vacuumed the tear closed—while Elara plugged another with thorns that crystallized inert, her movements efficient despite the limp from her thigh. They pursued, the entity's roars echoing as it hauled its colossal bulk after, incomplete but relentless, blades scraping stone in sparks. The rift pulled them through, hurling the trio into a volatile sub-realm of volcanic fissures—ground split by glowing cracks belching sulfurous fumes, rivers of magma bubbling in vast pits flanked by jagged basalt spires. Distant bellows rumbled from the haze, the scythe-clawed horror's pursuit warping the horizon, multiversal escalation thickening the air with pressure. Elara scanned the fissures, bow nocked. "Spread out—those vents could flank us." Her words carried a note of caution, eyes narrowing at the unstable terrain. Lirael summoned a shielding gale against an updraft of ash, coughing as particles coated her throat. "Agreed, but stay close to the paths; one wrong step and we're cooked." Terry adjusted his emitter, venting excess heat in sharp bursts, and led the charge across a narrowing ledge, the ground trembling beneath as pseudopods slithered from cracks, the plot's shadow lengthening with every roar. He leaped a

fissure, landing with a roll that jarred his gashed calf anew, and pressed on, slate beeping with partial downloads amid the surge.

Pseudopods erupted from the nearest fissure, their oily surfaces glistening under the crimson glow of magma rivers. Terry fired a plasma lance mid-stride, the bolt searing through one tendril with a hiss that vaporized segments into acrid steam. The severed stump writhed, spraying black ichor that sizzled on the basalt ledge, etching shallow pits into the stone. He skidded to a halt beside a jagged spire, emitter whining as it cycled for the next shot. The slate in his grip vibrated, its partial schematics flickering—blueprints of a fusion ritual, runes twisting like veins around a central engine core. Elara vaulted a steaming crack, her boots crunching on cooled lava shards. She loosed an arrow tipped with thorned barbs, the projectile embedding in a pseudopod's flank before roots burrowed deep, splitting the appendage with audible cracks. "Flank left—those things cluster at the vents," she called, her voice steady but edged with command as she nocked another shaft, pivoting to cover Terry's advance. Her thigh wound throbbed visibly, a dark stain spreading on her trousers, yet she planted her feet wide, refusing to yield ground. Lirael channeled a gust that hurled a swarm of ash-laden particles back into a pit, the wind whipping her hair into a frenzy. It bought them seconds, scattering pseudopods like debris in a gale. She glanced at the narrowing path ahead, brows furrowed. "Your plasma's drawing them—conserve it for the big one trailing us." Her fingers flexed around her bowstring, knuckles whitening as she loosed a bolt infused with electric charge, the arrow crackling into a pseudopod and exploding it in a shower of charred fragments that rained onto the ledge. The ground bucked, a tremor rippling from the depths. Distant roars echoed, the scythe-clawed entity's bellows warping the sulfurous air into pressure waves that stung their eyes. Terry gritted his teeth, ignoring the fresh jar in his calf as he dashed forward. He fired a harpoon line from his gauntlet, the cable embedding in a spire across the fissure with a metallic thunk. "No choice—it's gaining. We overload the next beacon we spot, cut off its path." The line retracted, yanking him across the gap in a controlled swing, his boots scraping basalt as he landed. They pressed into a descent, the ledge sloping into a volcanic ravine flanked

by sheer walls veined with glowing cracks. Magma bubbled in pools below, the heat rising in waves that blurred the horizon. Pseudopods slithered from hidden crevices, their tips probing like blind serpents. Elara rolled under one lash, coming up to drive her dagger into its base; thorns sprouted from the blade, coiling and crushing the tendril against the rock with a wet snap. Ichor splattered her arm, burning like acid—she hissed, shaking it off, but her stance shifted, favoring the uninjured side as she scanned for the leader's trail. A larger pseudopod burst from a wall fissure, slamming toward Lirael. She countered with a lightning-laced arrow, the bolt arcing from her bow in jagged forks that struck the appendage dead-center. Electricity surged, charring the surface black and causing it to convulse, segments exploding in pops of superheated gas. The backlash jolted her arm, frost from the prior realm lingering in her veins, making her grip falter for a heartbeat. "These aren't random— they're herding us downward," she barked, rubbing her elbow before drawing again, her eyes flicking to Terry with a nod of reluctant approval for his lead. Terry's slate pinged, triangulating a signal from the armored leader—faint, but pulsing toward the ravine's heart. He unleashed a kinetic shield, the energy field shimmering blue as it deflected a pseudopod whip that cracked against it like a bullwhip on ferrocrete. The impact reverberated up his arm, numbing his fingers. "There—beacon ahead, half-buried in that outcrop." He pointed to a rune-etched obelisk protruding from a ledge, its surface pulsing with oily black veins that fed into the surrounding stone. The descent steepened, forcing them to scramble over loose scree that shifted underfoot. A roar thundered closer, the entity's blades scraping distant spires in a screech that vibrated their bones. Pseudopods multiplied, coiling from fissures in coordinated lashes—one snagged Elara's boot, yanking her toward a magma pool. She twisted mid-fall, firing a vine-wrapped arrow into the tendril; roots exploded outward, anchoring her to solid ground as the pseudopod tore free with a rip, leaving her dangling. Terry extended his harpoon, the line snaring her harness—she hauled herself up, breath coming in sharp bursts, her free hand clenching the cable until her nails dug crescents into her palm. Lirael summoned a tempest burst, winds howling through the ravine to buffet the swarming tendrils. Debris flew—shards of basalt pelted the pseudopods,

embedding in their hides and drawing more ichor that steamed on contact with the heat. “Push to the obelisk—I’ll cover the rear,” she said, her tone clipped as she unleashed another gale, the force carving furrows in the ledge and scattering minions into the pits below, where they sizzled into oblivion. They reached the outcrop, the obelisk humming with unstable energy. Terry interfaced his gauntlet, conduits linking with a spark that sent feedback jolting through his wrist. Schematics flooded the slate: the leader’s ritual, fusing Riftblight with multiversal anchors to birth an engine that would tear stable rifts across realms. “It’s priming—overload now, or it amplifies the beast.” He routed plasma through the runes, the obelisk glowing white-hot. Elara bound the base with thorny vines, the growths piercing veins and drawing out black fluid that pooled and hardened into brittle spikes. She wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, leaving a streak of grime, her gaze steady on the horizon where shadows stirred. “Do it—before those roars close in.” Lirael channeled lightning into the structure, bolts chaining along the surface in crackling webs that fused with Terry’s plasma. The obelisk shuddered, conduits rupturing in explosive bursts—magma surged from nearby fissures, splashing against the ledge and melting chunks away in hissing cascades. The overload wave rippled outward, sealing minor breaches with contained blasts that vacuumed oily edges shut, leaving scorched craters in the rock. But the backlash stirred the air. The scythe-clawed entity’s roar peaked, a guttural thunder that cracked spires overhead. Chunks of basalt tumbled, forcing them to dive aside—one slab clipped Lirael’s shoulder, drawing blood that soaked her sleeve. Pseudopods retreated momentarily, only for elementals to coalesce from the steam: fiery wisps with clawing limbs of flame, lunging from vents. Terry fired a plasma grid, the lattice expanding to incinerate two elementals in bursts of ash and embers that drifted like foul snow. Elara’s arrows pierced another’s core, thorns extinguishing the blaze in a puff of smoke that choked the ravine. Lirael dispersed the last with a wind shear, the elemental unraveling into harmless sparks that pattered against the ground. The leader’s signal flickered, pulling deeper into the descent—a chasm yawning ahead, bridged by precarious arches of cooled lava. Distant roars grew insistent, the entity’s immense form silhouetted against the haze, blades

glinting as it hauled forward. Terry vented his gauntlet, heat mirages dancing from the vents, and led the scramble across the first arch. It groaned under their weight, fissures widening with each step. Elara tested the next span with an arrow, the shaft embedding shallow—she cursed under her breath, pulling it free with a yank that strained her wounded thigh. “These won’t hold—single file, light steps.” Her words brooked no argument, eyes locked on the unstable path. Lirael followed, her gales nudging them steady against gusts from below. A pseudopod snaked up from the chasm, lashing at her ankle—she stomped it down, lightning arcing from her boot to fry the tip, the smell of ozone mixing with sulfur. “It’s adapting—those veins are linking the fissures.” They crossed two arches, the third cracking midway. Terry leaped the gap, harpoon anchoring the far side; Elara and Lirael followed, vines and winds aiding their bounds. The slate updated—ritual coordinates converging on a volcanic forge below, the plot’s engine nearing ignition. A final roar split the air, closer now. The entity crested a ridge, its colossal frame blotting the glow, scythes carving swathes through spires in cascades of debris. Pseudopods heralded it, surging anew. They slid down a scree slope into the forge basin, heat blasting like an open kiln. Anvils of black stone loomed, veins pulsing across them. The leader’s trail ended at a central forge-obelisk, runes igniting in sequence. But from the chasm’s depths, a new tremor rose—not the entity’s, but something vaster, clawing upward through the magma. Lava bubbled violently.

Chapter 22: Magma’s Monstrous Birth

Lava bubbled in the forge basin like a cauldron of molten fury, its surface roiling under a sky choked with ash clouds. Terry skidded to a halt on the scorched basalt ledge, his boots grinding against jagged pumice that crumbled underfoot. The air reeked of sulfur and charred stone, each breath searing his lungs. Ahead, the armored leader knelt before the central obelisk—a towering spire of blackened rune-etched rock veined with glowing crimson fissures. Holographic interfaces flickered around him, casting erratic shadows on his visored helmet. Elara crouched beside Terry, her fingers digging into the warm earth, coaxing thorny

roots to snake across the uneven ground like probing fingers. Lirael flanked them, her staff humming with bottled gales, eyes narrowed at the leader's back. "He's channeling the rift's pulse," Lirael muttered, her voice a low rasp over the distant rumble of subterranean quakes. "One surge from that obelisk, and it'll tear the veil wide." Terry's emitter hummed in his grip, its coils glowing blue. He glanced at her, jaw set. "Then we cut the flow before it peaks. Elara, bind the base. Lirael, hit the runes when I mark them." His tone carried an edge, not quite an order, but close enough to make Lirael's grip tighten on her staff. The leader rose, his exosuit whirring as he slammed a gauntleted fist into the obelisk's core panel. Runes ignited in sequence, pulsing like heartbeats, and the lava below erupted in geysers of superheated slag. The ground heaved, cracking the ledge beneath them. From the churning depths, a colossal form breached the surface—magma-veined flesh armored in cooling basalt plates, its body a hulking mass of writhing tendrils and jagged spines. The entity bellowed, a sound like fracturing mountains, and hurled a wave of molten pseudopods that splattered against the basin walls, melting handholds into sizzling pits. "Core's exposed—now!" Terry barked, thrusting his emitter forward. Lances of superheated plasma streaked from the device, slamming into the entity's central mass. The beams bored craters into its hide, vaporizing rivulets of lava that sprayed back in hissing arcs. Steam billowed, obscuring the air, but Terry pressed on, his free hand steadying against a protruding boulder as the platform tilted. Elara's vines exploded from the soil, thick as cables and barbed with thorns that glowed faintly green. They lashed out, coiling around the entity's lower limbs, yanking them taut. The pseudopods whipped wildly, one grazing her shoulder and charring her cloak in a bloom of flame. She gritted her teeth, sweat beading on her brow, and twisted her hands to tighten the bindings. "It's pulling free—Terry, the joints!" Lirael channeled her stormweave, arms sweeping in a wide arc. A torrent of lightning forked from the thunderheads above, amplified by the basin's static-charged air, crashing into the obelisk's runes. Sparks danced across the stone, fracturing conduits that spewed acrid smoke. The entity thrashed, its spines raking furrows into the surrounding cliffs, dislodging boulders that tumbled into the lava with explosive plops. One pseudopod lashed out, catching Lirael across the ribs; she staggered, ribs

cracking audibly, but retaliated with a gale that hurled shards of pumice into the beast's maw. The armored leader pivoted, his rifle barking kinetic slugs that ricocheted off Terry's hastily raised kinetic shield—a shimmering barrier that absorbed the impacts with concussive thuds. "Fools," the leader growled through his visor, voice distorted by static. "This cascade will remake the realms. Your father's designs demand it." He jabbed at a console on the obelisk, downloading streams of data that materialized as holographic schematics: blueprints for a multiversal blight engine, veins of Riftblight threading through dimensional lattices, poised to flood Earth and beyond with uncontrolled mutations. Terry's eyes flicked to the display, his fingers flying over his emitter's interface to hijack the feed. "Demand? It's a plague." Data flooded his device—syndicate codes, activation sequences, proofs of weaponized corruption tied to hidden labs. But the entity surged, its core pulsing brighter, and a scorching eruption blasted upward, fracturing the platform into tilting slabs. Terry leaped to a narrower ledge, shield flickering under the heat, while pseudopods slammed down, shattering stone and sending fissures racing toward Elara. She vaulted aside, vines retracting to whip at the intruding limbs, but a glob of molten ichor splashed her leg, searing through her boot and blistering skin. Pain twisted her features, but she snarled, "Lirael—overload the upper runes! Force it to vent!" Lirael's response was a nod, terse and loaded with the strain of her injury. She poured more power into her weave, lightning chains arcing from staff to obelisk, superheating the stone until cracks spiderwebbed across its height. The entity roared, regenerative flesh bubbling as it knit wounds from the plasma strikes, but the disruption slowed it. Tendrils flailed, one coiling around a basalt pillar and uprooting it entirely, hurling the massive chunk toward the trio. Terry dove, rolling across gravel that burned his palms, and fired a plasma grid upward. The energy web intercepted the pillar mid-air, melting it into a cascade of slag that rained down in glowing droplets. The impact scorched his arm, raising welts, but he pushed up, emitter whining from overuse. "Schematics secured—target the core conduit!" The leader laughed, a metallic rasp, and activated a stabilizing portal at the obelisk's base—a swirling vortex of distorted space. "Enjoy the birth pangs." He stepped through, vanishing as reinforcements' silhouettes flickered in the rift's

edge—enforcers in exosuits, rifles priming. “No—” Elara lunged, vines extending to snag the portal’s rim, but the entity countered with a frenzy of pseudopods, one battering her back and sending her sprawling across jagged rock. Fractures spiderwebbed up her arm from the blow, breath hitching. Lirael, ribs protesting with every twist, unleashed a final tempest. Winds howled through the basin, whipping ash into blinding clouds and funneling lightning straight into the obelisk’s heart. Terry synced his emitter, channeling plasma into the storm’s core—a hybrid surge that overloaded the spire. Runes shattered in a chain of explosions, the obelisk groaning as its conduits ruptured, spewing gouts of pressurized steam and molten veins. The entity convulsed, its magma-veined bulk heaving as regeneration faltered. Pseudopods retracted in spasms, but in its death throes, it arched skyward, spines piercing the ash clouds. A seismic pulse rippled outward, the basin floor buckling and lava surging in tidal waves that licked at the ledges. The overload’s backlash tore open a new gateway—not the leader’s portal, but a jagged rift pulsing with academy nexus energy, pulling at them like a vacuum. Terry grabbed Elara’s arm, hauling her toward the rift as debris pelted them. Lirael stumbled after, lightning staff dimming, her free hand clutching her side where blood seeped through torn fabric. The entity’s final bellow echoed as its form sank back into the lava, dragging chunks of cliff with it. The gateway widened, its edges crackling with familiar riftblight shards, yanking them forward. They tumbled through, boots scraping against the threshold, into the dim underbelly of Eldergard Academy—tremors already shaking the walls, reinforcements’ shouts echoing from distant corridors. Terry’s emitter sparked in his fist, schematics intact, as he braced against a buckling beam.

The air in the underbelly hit like a furnace blast, thick with the acrid tang of overheated conduits and seeping riftblight. Terry’s boots skidded across the grated floor as the gateway’s pull spat them out, his shoulder slamming into a rusted pillar that groaned under the impact. The jolt jarred his teeth, sending a spike of nausea through his gut, but he clamped down on it, emitter clutched like a lifeline. Elara rolled to a crouch beside him, her fractured arm cradled against her chest, breaths coming in shallow rasps that fogged the chill academy air. Lirael hit the

deck harder, her twisted ankle buckling on landing; she bit back a hiss, lightning staff clattering as she dragged herself up, face paling from the fresh agony radiating up her leg. Tremors rattled the chamber, dislodging chunks of ceiling that plummeted like hammers, one grazing Terry's helmet and leaving a gash across his scalp. Warm blood trickled into his eye, stinging, but he blinked it away, scanning the dim expanse. The underbelly was a labyrinth of snaking pipes and flickering holo-panels, now marred by fresh veins of riftblight—oily black filaments worming through cracks in the concrete, crystallizing into needle-sharp barbs that hummed with a wet, crackling pulse. The stench rolled in waves: ozone sharp as a blade, undercut by that sickly sweet char of burnt sugar, clinging to their clothes like tar. "Perimeter check," Terry barked, voice low and edged, syncing his emitter to the nearest console. It whined in protest, power reserves dipping into the red. "Schematics show syndicate relays here—could be amplifying the quakes." Elara's eyes narrowed, her good hand flexing around her composite bow, vines already twitching along its frame like eager serpents. "Relays mean enforcers. Those silhouettes from the rift—they're closing." She nodded toward a distant archway, where shadows shifted, accompanied by the metallic clank of servos and priming energy cells. No accusation in her tone, just the flat assessment of someone weighing odds, her jaw set tight enough to whiten her knuckles. Lirael leaned against a bulkhead, testing her weight on the ankle; it gave with a sickening pop, forcing her to stifle a grunt. Sweat beaded on her brow, mixing with grime. "Then we cut the feed. Your plasma's fading—mine's got one storm left. Point me at the veins." Shouts echoed closer—harsh, amplified voices barking coordinates in a guttural enforcer dialect. Boots thudded in unison, the ground vibrating anew as a squad burst from the corridor: five figures in bulky exosuits, visors glowing crimson, rifles spitting azure plasma rounds that scorched the air. One suit's arm ended in a riftblight-fused claw, metal warped into bony protrusions that scraped sparks from the walls. Terry dove behind a toppled crate, the first volley chewing through it in a spray of splintered alloy. Shrapnel nicked his thigh, tearing fabric and drawing a hot line of blood, but he ignored it, emitter humming as he projected a kinetic shield—a shimmering dome that warped the incoming fire, deflecting bolts into the ceiling where they exploded

in cascades of molten droplets. The shield flickered, straining against the barrage. “Elara, bind the vanguard! Lirael, flank left—hit their joints!” Elara nocked an arrow, drawing the string with her uninjured arm; the bow creaked, infused mana blooming the projectile mid-release into a cluster of barbed tendrils. It streaked across the chamber, slamming into the lead enforcer’s chest plate. Vines erupted, coiling around servos and pistons with a fibrous snap, yanking the figure off-balance. The suit’s claw flailed, gouging a furrow in the floor that spewed steam, but the vines tightened, crushing hydraulics in a hiss of escaping fluid. The enforcer toppled, thrashing, as oily blight from its implant seeped out, bubbling on the grate like boiling pitch. Lirael limped sideways, staff raised; she channeled a gust that propelled her despite the ankle’s scream, wind whipping her hair into a frenzy. Her tempest coalesced not as a roar but a focused cyclone, funneling through the enforcers’ ranks. Lightning forked from the core, arcing to a rifle’s barrel— the weapon overloaded in a blue-white flash, the blast hurling its wielder backward into a pipe. The impact caved the enforcer’s helmet, visor shattering; the figure slumped, twitching, as riftblight veins in the suit pulsed erratically, fusing armor to flesh in grotesque ridges. But the gale’s backlash whipped Lirael against a console, her ribs cracking audibly under the strain—each inhale now a labored wheeze, pain lancing like shattered glass. Terry surged from cover, emitter channeling a lance of superheated plasma that punched through the air with a searing whine. It struck the claw-armed enforcer square in the pauldron, melting through synth-leather and bone in a gout of vaporized tissue. The figure bellowed through its grille, staggering, but not before its claw raked the air inches from Terry’s face— the near-miss left a whisker burn on his cheek, skin blistering instantly. He pivoted, shield collapsing as he fired again, the bolt grazing a second suit’s leg servos; the enforcer’s knee locked, toppling it into a vein cluster. Blight surged up the fallen body, crystallizing limbs into jagged obsidian, the transformation accompanied by a sickly slurp and the enforcer’s muffled screams turning to gurgles. “Console’s live—uploading schematics!” Terry yelled, slamming his gauntlet against the panel. Holo-screens flickered to life, projecting fragmented blueprints: a web of multiversal engines, each node laced with riftblight amplifiers, all tracing

back to a signature—his father's. The revelation hit like a gut punch, but he shoved it down, fingers flying over runes. "Leader's building a cascade. Weaponize the blight across realms—starting here. We overload the local relay, it buys time." Elara grunted, loosing another arrow that snared a rifle from mid-air, vines wrenching it aside before it could fire. "Time for what? Your father's ghost in the code, and we're knee-deep in his mess." Her words carried no venom, just the bite of exhaustion, as she rolled to avoid a pseudopod erupting from a cracked floor tile— a leftover echo from the sub-realm, black and veined with cooling magma, lashing out like a whip. It grazed her boot, the contact searing through sole and skin, leaving a charred welt that smoked. The remaining enforcers adapted, one priming a grenade that hummed with contained plasma. Lirael intercepted with a wind shear, the device veering off-course to detonate against a wall— the explosion rocked the chamber, pressure wave slamming her flat. Ears ringing with a shrill whine, she tasted copper on her tongue from a bitten lip, vision blurring as she hauled herself up. "Relay's exposed—channel through me!" she rasped, staff extended toward Terry, arcs of electricity dancing along its length. He nodded, syncing the emitter; plasma flowed into her stormweave, the fusion birthing a hybrid bolt that arced across the room. It struck the relay node—a throbbing obelisk remnant half-buried in the wall— with a thunderclap. Conduits burst in sequence, spewing arcs of energy that danced like captive lightning, igniting blight veins in purifying flares. The pseudopod withered, retracting with a wet pop, its tip dissolving into acrid sludge that pooled and hardened into brittle spikes. But the overload rippled outward, tremors intensifying as distant rifts yawned wider. Reinforcements poured in from side tunnels—more exosuits, flanked by corrupted drones buzzing with crystalline rotors, their blades whirring. One drone dove at Elara, rotors shearing her bowstring; she discarded the weapon, summoning raw vines from the floor cracks that speared upward, impaling the machine in a shower of sparks and oil. The impact drove thorns into her palm, drawing blood that mixed with the blight's residue, her skin itching as if ants crawled beneath. Terry's emitter overheated, venting steam that scalded his wrist, but he fired a parting grid— interlocking plasma beams that sliced through two drones, wreckage tumbling in flaming heaps. Lirael unleashed

the dregs of her tempest, gales scattering a charging enforcer into a vein cluster; the suit fused mid-stride, metal blooming into tumorous growths that locked joints in place. The squad faltered, shouts turning to static as the relay's death throes shorted their comms. Yet the walls buckled further, a massive crack splitting the floor to reveal writhing tendrils below— riftblight surging from the academy's core, drawn by the cascade's echo. Elara seized Terry's arm, pulling him back as a tendril lashed out, its tip glancing his shield and sending vibrations up his bones that numbed his fingers. "Core's compromised—schematics point to the nexus hub," Terry said, voice steady despite the quake rattling his stance. He pocketed the data core, emitter dimming to a sullen glow. Lirael limped forward, staff as a crutch, her free hand pressing against the cracked ribs, each step a grimace. They pressed into the shaking corridor, the air growing heavier with the riftblight's reek, distant roars hinting at larger horrors stirring below. Terry led, emitter raised, as a fresh squad's lights pierced the gloom ahead.

The squad's lights resolved into the hulking silhouettes of enforcers, their exosuits etched with glowing conduits that pulsed like infected arteries. Terry ducked behind a jutting slab of fractured basalt, emitter humming as he calibrated a suppressing burst. The air thickened, ozone mingling with the burnt-sugar tang of riftblight, making his throat constrict. Elara crouched beside him, fingers digging into the stone, coaxing roots through fissures that snaked toward the intruders like seeking veins. Lirael leaned against the wall, breath ragged, her staff crackling with residual charge that made her hair stand on end. "Flank left—I'll draw," Terry hissed, eyes flicking to Elara. No question in his tone, just the assumption she'd comply, her loyalty a given he never questioned. She nodded, jaw set, but her glance at Lirael lingered—a silent tally of the stormweaver's faltering stance. Lirael met it with a sharp exhale, pushing off the wall despite the wince that twisted her features. "Draw and hold. I'll crack their shields." The enforcers advanced, boots clanging against the trembling floor. One raised a plasma rifle, barrel glowing cherry-red. Terry fired first—a lance of searing energy that punched through the lead suit's chest plate, erupting in a gout of molten slag that fused the joints. The figure toppled,

armor screeching as it scraped stone, but the squad returned fire. Bolts sizzled past, one grazing Terry's shoulder and hurling him sideways. He skidded, the impact jarring his elbow against a vein nodule that burst under his weight, spraying viscous ichor that clung like tar, weighing his arm down. Elara's roots erupted, coiling around an enforcer's legs and yanking him off-balance. He crashed face-first, helmet cracking on basalt, but twisted free with a vibro-knife that severed the tendrils in sprays of sap and sparks. Lirael channeled a gust, wind howling through the corridor to buffet the group, slamming two into the wall where conduits overloaded in blue-white flares. The blast's backlash whipped her staff back, the shaft slamming her thigh and buckling her knee. She staggered, vision blurring from the strain, but loosed a bolt that arced into another's visor, cooking the interior in a muffled scream. The remaining enforcers broke, retreating into the gloom as distant rifts belched steam. Terry rose, shaking off the ichor, his shoulder throbbing with a deep ache that radiated to his fingertips. "Push. Leader's signal's spiking ahead." They advanced, corridor narrowing to a jagged archway that framed a swirling vortex— a stabilizing portal, its edges rimmed with magma glow. Heat blasted out, singeing Elara's sleeves as she stepped through first, bow reformed from woven fibers in her grip. The transition wrenched at Terry's gut, space folding like crumpled foil, depositing them in the forge basin. Blackened iron floors stretched vast, etched with runes that throbbed like heartbeats, walls lined with forges belching half-melted ingots into rivers of slag. The air scorched lungs, heavy with sulfur and the riftblight's cloying sweetness. At the basin's heart loomed the central obelisk, a towering spire of obsidian and brass, its apex humming with energy as the armored leader knelt before it. His gauntlets interfaced with the base, conduits flaring as he chanted in a guttural code—runes igniting in sequence. Lava churned in the obelisk's moat, bubbling with unnatural vigor. A rumble built, the surface splitting to birth the entity: colossal, magma-veined, its form a hulking mass of molten rock and writhing pseudopods, veins pulsing black ichor that sizzled on contact. It rose with a groan of cracking stone, pseudopods lashing out in waves, each tipped with crystalline barbs that dripped scorching droplets. "Seal it now!" Terry barked, emitter whining as he unleashed a plasma lance straight

at the core—a glowing fissure in the beast's chest. The beam struck true, vaporizing a layer of rock in a hiss of steam, but the entity regenerated, flesh bubbling back like cooling lava. A pseudopod whipped toward him, forcing a dive; it smashed the floor where he'd stood, sending shards flying that pelted his back like hot gravel, embedding flecks that burned through fabric and seared skin. Elara rolled to her feet, summoning thorny vines from cracks in the iron—thick as cables, they surged upward to bind the entity's limbs, thorns piercing magma hide and drawing rivulets of glowing slag. The beast thrashed, pseudopods erupting in retaliation, one slamming her side and flinging her across the basin. She hit a forge ledge, the edge biting into her hip with a grind of bone, pain lancing up her spine as she gasped, ribs protesting the jolt. Lirael staggered forward, staff raised, channeling a lightning storm that crackled across the obelisk. Bolts forked into the ritual circle, disrupting the runes in explosive pops, the air ionizing with a metallic tang. The entity bellowed, a sound like grinding tectonic plates, and unleashed scorching eruptions—geysers of lava that sprayed the basin, one catching Lirael's leg and hurling her backward. She landed hard, the impact driving the air from her lungs in a wheeze, ankle twisting under her weight with a sickening snap that left her boot askew. "Download the core—I'll cover!" Terry shouted to Elara, who was already scrambling toward the obelisk, vines retracting to free her path. She interfaced her gauntlet, fingers flying over runes as schematics flooded her display: syndicate blueprints for a multiversal blight cascade, veins to flood realms with weaponized corruption, all rooted in twisted Nexus-weaves from his father's labs. Her eyes widened, but she yanked the data spike free just as a pseudopod lashed at the base. The leader rose, visor gleaming. "Fools. The cascade begins." He activated a wrist panel, portal shimmering behind him. Terry fired another lance, the beam grazing the leader's pauldron and melting a furrow that smoked. "Not without us." But the entity rampaged, pseudopods sweeping in arcs that shattered basalt platforms. One clipped Elara mid-leap, the force spinning her into a wall where her shoulder dislocated with a wet pop, arm dangling limp as she bit back a cry. Lirael dragged herself up, ignoring the ankle's fire, and poured her tempest into the beast's core. Lightning chained across veins, superheating ichor into explosive bursts that cracked the hide.

The entity recoiled, but regenerated fiercer, a limb regenerating into a scythe that slashed at her. She dodged, the blade carving a furrow in the floor that erupted in flames, the heat blistering her calves and forcing a hobble. “Bind it—full weave!” Elara called through gritted teeth, slinging her good arm to summon a lattice of vines that wrapped the scythe, thorns grinding into magma with sizzles. Terry synced his emitter, plasma grid interlocking with her growth, superheating the bindings to fuse them solid. The entity strained, platforms buckling under the strain, chunks plummeting into the lava moat with hisses. Lirael’s storm peaked, gales whipping embers into a vortex that scoured the beast’s form, eroding layers in peels of char. But the regenerative fury mounted—a pseudopod burst free, coiling around Terry’s leg and yanking him off his feet. It dragged him toward the moat, the iron scorching his palms as he clawed for purchase. Heat blistered his thigh, muscles seizing in agony, until Elara’s vine spear impaled the coil, severing it in a spray of molten droplets that sizzled on his skin, raising welts like branded sigils. The leader bolted for the portal, enforcers materializing from side forges to cover his retreat—drones whirring, rifles barking. Terry broke free, emitter flaring overload. “End it!” He slammed a plasma surge into the obelisk’s base, conduits fracturing in chain reactions. Elara bound the apex with vines, thorns piercing crystal facets, while Lirael’s lightning arced through, the combined assault igniting the core in a cataclysmic bloom. The obelisk shuddered, runes exploding in sequence, the entity convulsing as its veins ruptured. Pseudopods flailed wildly, one cratering the platform under Lirael and sending her tumbling, the fall wrenching her twisted ankle further and slamming her elbow into iron, numbing the limb with a jolt that blurred her sight. Terry braced, the backlash wave hurling him back, spine cracking against a forge wall that left him winded, ribs compressing like a vice with each labored inhale. Elara clung to a vine anchor, the overload’s shockwave ripping at her hair, dislocated shoulder screaming as she held the data spike aloft. The beast’s death throes peaked—a final eruption ripping the basin’s floor, lava surging in a tidal wave that scorched the air. The leader vanished through the portal, but the rift tore wider, a gateway yawning to the academy’s core—familiar stone vaults glimpsed amid the chaos, tremors syncing with distant academy quakes. The pull

gripped them, space warping like a vacuum. Terry lunged for Elara's arm, fingers locking as vines snapped loose. Lirael clawed at the edge, nails splintering on basalt, but the gateway dragged them in—reinforcements' shadows lengthening across the tear as they tumbled through, the forge's roar fading to the academy's echoing collapse. Elara's grip tightened on the spike, her free hand pressing her shoulder in a vise to steady the pain, while Terry's emitter sparked erratically, casting flickering light on the emerging horrors below. They plummeted toward the nexus hub, the air alive with riftblight's hungry pulse.

The nexus hub sprawled below like a fractured heart, its vaulted ceilings cracked and weeping oily tendrils that pooled into bubbling slicks on the mosaic floors. Riftblight veins throbbed along the walls, pulsing with that acrid tang of ozone and charred caramel, thickening the air until each breath clawed at Terry's throat. He twisted mid-fall, emitter humming erratically in his grip, its blue glow stuttering against the encroaching black shimmer. Elara dangled from his hand, her face etched in grim lines, free fingers digging into her dislocated shoulder to anchor the joint against the wind's howl. Lirael flailed nearby, her good arm slashing futile arcs, the numbed elbow dragging like dead weight. "Brace!" Terry barked, channeling a kinetic shield from his emitter—a shimmering disc of force that bloomed outward, catching the air with a resonant thrum. It slowed their descent just enough, the barrier crumpling on impact against a toppled console, metal buckling with a screech that vibrated through his bones. Pain lanced his ribs anew, a white-hot vise squeezing until spots danced in his vision. He rolled free, coughing grit, while Elara landed in a crouch beside him, vines uncoiling from her gauntlets to cushion the jolt—though her shoulder popped audibly, drawing a hiss through clenched teeth. Lirael hit harder, her twisted ankle buckling on a shard of crystallized blight, the impact jarring her elbow and sending fresh numbness spidering up her arm. She bit back a curse, rolling to her knees amid scattering debris, stormweave flickering at her fingertips like bottled thunder. The hub shuddered, tremors rippling from the fresh gateway above—a jagged tear in reality, its edges fraying with molten residue from the forge realm, spewing embers that hissed against the stone. Reinforcements poured through first: not the

leader, but his vanguard—exosuit enforcers dropping in synchronized drops, boots clanging on the floor as thrusters flared. Their visors gleamed crimson, rifles cycling with a mechanical whine, while bulbous breach anomalies bulged from the rift's margins, swollen sacs leaking corrosive ooze that etched furrows into the air itself. "Flank left—cover the breach!" Elara snapped, her voice a whipcrack over the rumble. She didn't wait for nods; thorns erupted from her palms, lancing toward the nearest anomaly. The sacs burst under the assault, shards exploding outward in a spray of jagged black crystal that peppered an enforcer's armor, pitting the plates with sizzling craters. The man staggered, but fired back—a plasma bolt grazing Elara's thigh, searing fabric and flesh in a line of blistering heat. Terry surged up, ribs protesting with every flex, emitter locking onto the enforcer's joint. A lance of superheated plasma streaked out, melting the rifle's barrel in a gout of vaporized metal. The weapon drooped, useless, but the enforcer charged, gauntlet whirring to crush. Terry dodged, the blow cratering the console behind him, sparks flying like angry hornets. He countered with a point-blank burst, the plasma coring through the suit's chest plate; the enforcer toppled, armor slagging into a molten puddle that warped the floor tiles. Lirael rose unsteadily, ankle throbbing like a hammer on anvil, and unleashed a gale—winds howling through the hub, whipping loose cables and hurling a second anomaly into the wall. It ruptured on impact, ooze splattering across a cluster of enforcers, the corruption eating through visors and eliciting muffled screams as flesh bubbled beneath. But the rift belched more: drones buzzing in, their underbellies glowing with rift-blight injectors, needles primed to mutate on contact. "Data spike—now!" Terry yelled, lunging for Elara's side. She thrust it into a nearby terminal, the device whirring as schematics flooded the cracked screen: blueprints of a blight engine, veins of corruption laced through multiversal conduits, all stamped with his father's sigil—a twisted Nexus weave meant to stabilize, not destroy. The revelation hit like a gut punch; Terry's jaw tightened, fingers white-knuckling the emitter. His old man hadn't just researched this—he'd architected the cascade, a weapon to flood realms with controlled mutations, turning soldiers into abominations. Elara's eyes narrowed at the display, thorns retracting as she scanned. "Your father's work... it's the key. They're

fusing it with the rifts—turning blight into a floodgate." Her tone carried an edge, not accusation, but the tactical bite of doubt: how deep did Terry's arrogance run, chasing echoes of a legacy that birthed this hell? No time for words. A drone dove at Lirael, injector stabbing down. She twisted, ankle giving way with a sickening grind, and her stormweave erupted—a torrent of lightning chaining from her palm, arcing through the drone's chassis. It detonated in a burst of shrapnel, fragments slicing her forearm, blood welling hot and sticky. "Bastards adapt fast," she growled, wind gusting to buffet the swarm. Drones scattered, but two enforcers closed in, exosuits humming with overcharge. Terry jury-rigged a mana-siphon from the terminal's cables, ripping wires free with a sparking yank. Energy siphoned from the hub's walls, feeding his emitter until it glowed white-hot. He fired a amplified grid—plasma weaving into a net that ensnared an enforcer, the lattice contracting with a hiss of superheated air, armor compressing until servos screamed and burst in oily jets. The man slumped, but his partner retaliated, a vibro-blade extending to slash at Terry's midsection. The edge scored his jacket, drawing a shallow line across his abdomen that burned like acid. Elara intercepted, vines surging from the floor—thorny coils wrapping the blade and wrenching it aside, thorns piercing the suit's hydraulics in sprays of fluid. She yanked, shoulder grinding in protest, and the enforcer stumbled into Lirael's path. Lightning forked down, charring the figure from crown to boot, the smell of ozone sharpening as flesh crisped beneath the armor. The rift widened with a groan, the gateway's edges grinding like tectonic plates, pulling in academy debris—shattered statues and console fragments tumbling back through. Tremors intensified, the hub's central nexus core fracturing, riftblight seeping from new fissures in the pedestal. More anomalies swelled along the tear, sacs inflating with ominous gurgles, while enforcer shadows multiplied in the haze. "Seal it—before the whole hub unravels!" Lirael urged, her voice strained, elbow hanging limp as she funneled another gale to hold back the drone flank. Wind howled, scattering the machines into the walls with bone-crunching impacts, but her face paled, the effort taxing her numbed limb. Terry nodded, ripping the spike free—schematics downloaded, the engine's weakness clear: overload the core with a feedback loop. He slammed it into his emitter, runes interfacing with

a digital chime. “Elara, bind the pedestal. Lirael, prime the storm—channel it through me.” Friction sparked in their glances: Elara’s hesitation flickered, her hand hovering over the vines as if weighing the risk of his untested weave against the blight’s spread. Lirael just scowled, ankle braced against a chunk of stone, lightning coiling at her tips like serpents ready to strike. Vines lashed out first, Elara’s growths encircling the nexus core, thorns embedding in crystal veins to anchor and pierce. The blight recoiled, oily tendrils writhing like severed nerves. Lirael fed her tempest into Terry’s emitter, electricity crackling along the barrel, the air ionizing with a sharp bite. He triggered the surge—a plasma storm erupting from the device, lances fusing with lightning to hammer the core. Conduits lit up, fracturing in luminous cracks, the overload rippling back through the rift. Anomalies detonated in chain, sacs bursting to shower the hub with crystalline shrapnel that clattered like hail, embedding in walls and flesh alike. Enforcers faltered, suits shorting in sparks, one toppling into a fissure where blight swallowed him whole, armor dissolving in gurgles. The gateway buckled, edges sealing with a thunderous snap, but not before reinforcements spilled out—a final wave of drones and a hulking brute in rift-forged plate, its claws scraping stone as it landed with earth-shaking force. The hub stabilized, tremors easing to aftershocks, but the brute charged, pseudopod arms extending in molten whips. Terry’s emitter smoked, overheated, as Elara recoiled her vines and Lirael slumped against a pillar, blood dripping from her gashes. The air thickened again, riftblight’s pulse quickening beneath their feet. Then the floor heaved, a deeper vein erupting inches from Lirael’s boot.

Chapter 23: Nexus Vein Eruption

The nexus hub shuddered like a beast in its death throes, the ferrocrete floor heaving upward in jagged fissures that spat acrid steam. From the heart of the central pedestal, where Terry had just superheated the rift’s edges into glassy slag, a thicker vein of riftblight burst forth. It resembled a colossal artery torn open, oily black ichor geysering in rhythmic pulses that carried the sharp tang of ozone laced with charred caramel. Crystalline

shards erupted alongside, scattering across the chamber like shattered obsidian, each one humming with a low, bone-vibrating resonance that set Terry's teeth on edge. "Flank it!" Terry barked, his voice cutting through the groan of buckling supports. He pivoted on his heel, emitter humming in his grip as he channeled a lance of superheated plasma. The beam sliced into the vein's outer sheath, vaporizing a spray of tendrils that whipped toward him, their tips glistening with corrosive slime. One grazed his armored pauldron, eating through the synthweave with a sizzle that left a smoking pit and a sting like acid on his collarbone. Elara, her face smeared with soot and sweat, dropped into a crouch beside a toppled console, her fingers digging into the ferrocrete as if drawing strength from the stone itself. Thorny vines erupted from her palms, coiling like serpents forged from barbed ironwood, and lashed out to ensnare a cluster of the vein's spawning abominations. The crystalline crawlers—fist-sized horrors with jagged limbs that skittered like deranged insects—shattered against her bindings, their fragments crunching underfoot with a sound like breaking glass. But the effort pulled at her reserves; her shoulders trembled, a fresh gash on her thigh from an earlier enforcer's blade weeping blood that soaked her boot. Lirael leaned against a warped pillar, her left arm cradled against her ribs where the electrocution had left her skin blistered and raw. Pain etched lines around her eyes, but she forced a gust of wind from her free hand, the air crackling with static as it hurled a swarm of crawlers into the vein's maw. "The core—it's pulsing faster," she rasped, her breath hitching as a tendril flicked toward her. It coiled around her ankle, yanking her off balance; she slammed onto the floor, the impact jarring her wounded side and forcing a guttural gasp from her throat. Her vision blurred for an instant, ribs protesting with every inhale, but she twisted free with a surge of lightning that arced along the tendril, charring it to brittle ash. The vein retaliated with a hallucinatory barrage, not as ethereal whispers but as tangible onslaughts that clawed at their senses. Terry staggered as the air thickened with phantom smoke, his nostrils filling with the metallic bite of blood that wasn't there, while the chamber walls seemed to warp into leering faces—distorted echoes of academy mentors, their mouths gaping in silent screams. He shook it off, slamming his fist against his temple to clear the fog, the

pressure grounding him. “Ignore the ghosts—focus fire on the bulge!” His tone carried an edge, less command than demand, as if questioning their resolve in the same breath. Elara nodded sharply, her jaw set, and extended her vines toward the vein’s throbbing nexus—a fist-sized knot midway up the geysering column, where the blight concentrated into a pulsating orb. The tendrils around it thickened, lashing out in arcs that scored the air with corrosive splatters, one hitting a nearby bulkhead and melting it into dripping slag that pooled like molten tar. She bound the base, thorns piercing the oily flesh with wet pops, but the orb recoiled, spawning a fresh wave of abominations that burrowed into the floor and erupted beneath her feet. Shards flew, one embedding in her forearm like a dagger; she wrenched it free with a hiss, the wound pulsing with unnatural warmth that made her fingers numb. Lirael rolled to her knees, ignoring the fire in her side, and summoned a chain of lightning surges. Bolts forked from her fingertips, slamming into the orb with thunderous cracks that echoed off the vaulted ceiling, fracturing the crystal shell and sending sparks dancing across the ichor. The vein convulsed, its pulses quickening to a frantic rhythm, and the hallucinatory assault intensified—Elara clutched her head as phantom insects crawled over her skin, their imagined legs prickling like real barbs, forcing her to scratch at her neck until welts rose. “It’s… burrowing illusions into the air,” she ground out, vines tightening in response, crushing a crawler that had latched onto her boot. Terry adjusted his emitter’s output, the device whining in protest as he fired a sustained plasma grid—a web of searing lines that intersected the vein like a surgical net. The heat warped the air, turning the ichor to steam that billowed in choking clouds, carrying the sickly sweet burn of sugar on the wind. Tendrils writhed within the grid, segments sloughing off in charred clumps, but one broke through to coil around his leg, squeezing until the armor creaked and pain bloomed in his calf like a vice of fire. He blasted it point-blank, the explosion hurling him backward; he crashed into a console, the edge digging into his spine and knocking the breath from his lungs in a whoosh that left him wheezing. Together, they pressed the assault. Elara’s vines hauled the orb downward, exposing it fully, while Lirael’s lightning danced across its surface, cracking fissures that wept black fluid. Terry’s plasma lance pierced the heart, superheating

the core until it swelled and burst in a fountain of vaporized blight. The vein spasmed once, twice, then deflated, collapsing into a smoldering crater that hissed and popped like cooling lava. The chamber's tremors eased, the buckling walls groaning to a halt, and the hallucinatory haze dissipated, leaving only the acrid aftertaste on their tongues. Panting, Terry staggered to the pedestal, slapping a palm against its interface. A holographic surge flickered to life, projections blooming in azure light amid the debris. Intercepted transmissions scrolled across the display—syndicate chatter, encrypted bursts detailing the armored leader's flight to a "convergence nexus" beyond Earth's fractured skies. Schematics unfurled, overlays of ferrocrete obelisks and runic arrays that matched the prototypes from his father's old logs: a multiversal engine, designed to harness riftblight not as a curse, but as a forge for reshaping realms. Terry's fingers tightened on the emitter's grip, knuckles whitening, as the implications sank in—his father's work, twisted into this weapon of endless mutation. "Prince's weaves... they were the key," Elara muttered, wiping ichor from her brow, her eyes flicking to Terry with a mix of accusation and urgency. "If that's true, what else did he leave behind?" Before he could retort, the vein's backlash hit. The cauterized crater fractured wider, the floor splitting with a seismic crack that vibrated through their bones. From the depths below, a subterranean guardian beast clawed upward—a hulking mass of twisted stone and blight-veined muscle, its maw a cavern of jagged fangs dripping viscous slime. The air filled with its roar, a guttural bellow that rattled loose panels and sent dust cascading from the ceiling. One massive paw slammed down, shattering a section of grating and hurling shards like shrapnel; a fragment clipped Lirael's shoulder, spinning her into the wall with a thud that cracked her collarbone and drew a sharp cry. "Move—tunnels, now!" Terry yelled, grabbing Lirael's good arm and hauling her upright as the beast's tail— a whip of armored bone—swept through the space they'd occupied, pulverizing a console into rubble. Elara bolted ahead, vines snaking out to brace a sagging archway, her face twisted in grim focus. They plunged into the nearest corridor, the ground bucking beneath them, deeper tremors rumbling like the academy's own heartbeat failing. The beast's claws gouged the floor behind, pursuing with earth-shaking strides, as cracks spiderwebbed outward, heralding

the cataclysm to come. Lirael stumbled, her free hand clutching her new injury, but she summoned a gale to propel them forward, the wind howling through the narrowing passage.

The wind from Lirael's gale shoved them onward, whipping grit and frost from the tunnel walls into their faces, but it couldn't outpace the beast's relentless advance. Its bulk scraped against the narrowing confines, stone groaning as jagged protrusions on its hide gouged furrows into the ferrocrete. Terry glanced back, emitter humming in his grip—fire a plasma lance to slow it, or risk the charge overheating in the confined space? The immediate goal was distance: seal off the passage behind them before the thing crushed through. He pivoted, boots skidding on slick residue, and unleashed a searing bolt that struck the beast's forelimb. The impact vaporized a patch of blight-veined flesh, sending acrid steam hissing into the air, but the creature only bellowed louder, its slime-dripping maw snapping at the plasma's afterglow. Elara, leading the dash, twisted mid-stride to lash thorny vines from her palms— not at the beast directly, that would tangle them all in the squeeze, but at the ceiling overhead. The growths burrowed into cracks, thickening into cables that yanked down a cascade of rubble, forming a makeshift barricade. Chunks plummeted, one glancing off the beast's shoulder and eliciting a furious swipe that pulverized the debris into powder. "Keep pushing—left fork, it's wider!" she barked, her breath ragged, fingers flexing as if testing the strain on her weaves. The air reeked of damp earth and ozone, the tunnel's chill seeping through their fatigues like icy fingers. Lirael lagged, her gale faltering as pain from the cracked collarbone radiated with each jolt. She pressed her palm to the injury, summoning a weaker gust that buffeted the pursuing guardian, but it staggered her own balance—forward momentum or brace against the wall? The wall won; she slammed her shoulder into it, the impact jarring her teeth and drawing a hiss through clenched jaws. "Can't... hold the wind much longer," she grated, eyes narrowing at the beast's glowing veins pulsing like exposed wiring. Terry hauled her along by the elbow, his mind racing through options: the emitter's shield could buy seconds, but deploying it here meant no offensive shots, and the tunnel's curve ahead hid whatever fresh hell awaited. "Elara, scout the fork—vines for trip lines if

it's clear." He fired another lance, this one grazing the beast's tail; the appendage whipped wildly, cracking against the wall and sending vibrations that loosened a overhead panel. It plummeted like a guillotine, clipping the creature's flank and eliciting a spray of viscous ichor that sizzled on the floor, eating through metal with a foul, bubbling hiss. They burst into the left fork, a broader service conduit lined with rusted conduits and flickering emergency strips that cast erratic shadows. The beast's roar echoed closer, its claws rending the barricade behind them with wet, tearing sounds. Elara knelt briefly, slamming her hands to the ground; roots erupted in a tangled web across the threshold, barbed and pulsing with sap that glowed faintly green. "That'll snag it—maybe buy a minute." Her face was smeared with sweat and grime, but she rose without pause, scanning the dim expanse. The air here carried a metallic tang, undercut by the distant drip of leaking pipes. No time for relief. The ground heaved again, a deeper tremor that buckled the floor into uneven ridges, forcing Terry to leap a fissure while supporting Lirael's weight. She stumbled over the lip, her boot catching, and the jolt twisted her bad shoulder—agony flared like a hot poker, making her vision blur with black spots, breath coming in shallow gasps that tasted of blood. "Damn it—lightning chain, low yield, to the conduits up there," she directed through gritted teeth, pointing with her good hand at overhead cables snaking along the ceiling. Risky: a short could electrify the whole tunnel, but it might arc back to the beast if timed right. Terry nodded, adjusting his emitter's output—plasma tether to guide her strike, or let her loose and cover the fallout? He chose the tether, a thin beam lancing out to link with her gathering storm. Lirael channeled the energy, her fingers crackling as azure bolts leaped from her palm, coiling along the tether like serpents. The lightning struck the conduits with a deafening crackle, sparks erupting in a fountain that rained down like molten stars. The beast, barreling through the vine snare, caught the discharge full-on; its body convulsed, stone hide fracturing with pops of superheated rock, one paw seizing mid-swipe and slamming uselessly into the wall, embedding claws deep enough to halt its charge momentarily. The air filled with the sharp scent of scorched stone and singed blight, the heat wave blasting their faces like an open furnace. But the backlash rippled through the tunnel—conduits

burst in sequence, hurling globs of molten wiring that scorched Elara's arm as she dodged, the burn blistering skin and drawing a sharp inhale that made her grip her bow tighter, knuckles paling. "Forward—don't let up!" Terry urged, dragging Lirael past the chaos. The beast shook off the stun, dislodging its paw with a grind of stone on metal, and resumed the hunt, its labored breaths echoing like bellows in a forge. They pressed on, the corridor sloping downward into a junction chamber where multiple paths converged, walls etched with faded ward-stones that hummed faintly, their silver runes flickering like dying embers. One stone caught Terry's eye—embedded in the left wall, its resonance vibrating against his emitter, syncing briefly with his nexus weave. Data fragment? Or trap? He hesitated, weighing the split-second: interface now for potential schematics on the convergence point, or evade the beast first? The roar decided for him; he fired a suppressive plasma grid, a web of energy that sizzled across the junction, forcing the guardian to veer right into a side passage. Elara seized the moment, vines probing the ward-stone's edges, coaxing its mana to flare brighter. "It's linked—old seals, like the hub's." Her voice held a edge of suspicion, eyes darting to Terry as if measuring his intent. Lirael leaned against the opposite wall, summoning a barrier of swirling air to block the junction, but the effort drained her; her knees buckled slightly, the wind wall thinning as fatigue clawed at her limbs, each breath a labored wheeze from the collarbone's throb. The stone's hum intensified, projecting a hazy overlay—snippets of intercepted chatter, voices distorted by static: "... convergence nexus primed... Prince prototypes integrated... riftblight forge operational in underbelly core..." Terry's jaw tightened, his free hand clenching into a fist as he synced his emitter, pulling the data stream. Blueprints ghosted into view: obelisks pulsing with blight, arrays channeling mutations into structured weapons, all bearing his father's runic signature—precise, engineering weaves now corrupted into engines of endless reshaping. "He's not just escaping—he's activating it there. The underbelly's the anchor point." Elara's vines retracted with a snap, her expression hardening as she wiped sweat from her eyes. "Your father's ghosts again. We cut that vein, or the whole academy folds." No accusation in her tone, just tactical steel, but her stance shifted closer to Lirael, a subtle shield. The beast's impact shook the

chamber, its bulk wedging into the junction, fangs gnashing through the wind barrier and sending gusts scattering debris. Slime from its maw splattered the floor, corroding a panel into bubbling foam that released choking fumes—acrid, like vinegar mixed with rot—making Lirael's eyes water and her gorge rise, forcing a cough that wracked her frame. Terry broke the sync, emitter whirring as he targeted the beast's maw—lance to the throat for a kill shot, or shield to buy retreat time? Retreat won; he erected a kinetic barrier, the field shimmering blue as the creature's head rammed it, the collision reverberating up his arms like a hammer blow, numbing his fingers. Elara's roots lashed out, coiling around a forelimb to yank it off-balance, the strain pulling at her blistered arm and drawing beads of blood through the fabric. Lirael, fighting nausea, hurled a concentrated lightning bolt that arced across the barrier, striking the beast's eye—orbit exploding in a flash of vaporized fluid, the guardian rearing back with a shriek that pierced their eardrums, leaving a persistent whine in their skulls. They bolted down the central path, the ward-stone's glow fading behind as the beast thrashed, dislodging chunks of ceiling that rained down in a staccato barrage. One slab clipped Terry's calf, the blunt force bruising muscle and sending him staggering, pain shooting up his leg like fire in his veins, slowing his stride to a limp. The tunnel narrowed further, steam hissing from ruptured lines, the air thickening with heat and the metallic bite of exposed wiring. Deeper rumbles built, the walls groaning as if the academy itself protested, cracks widening to belch puffs of dust. Elara glanced back, vines ready to seal another choke point, her breath steady despite the burn's sting. "Underbelly core—straight shot if we don't get buried first." Lirael nodded grimly, her gale reduced to a supportive breeze that eased their flight, but her free hand trembled against the wall, steadying against the mounting vertigo from pain and fumes. Terry pushed through the limp, emitter scanning for structural weak points—overload a support beam to collapse the path, trapping the beast for good? The risk of entombing themselves held him back; instead, he amped a plasma arc to the ceiling ahead, melting a strut that sagged and dropped, blocking the view behind. The beast's muffled roars faded slightly, but the tremors intensified, floor tilting as a fresh fissure snaked toward their feet. They rounded a bend into a vast underbelly vault, the

space yawning with shadowed alcoves and pulsing veins threading the walls like infected arteries. At the center loomed the core—a throbbing obelisk of fused stone and metal, blight seeping from its base in oily rivulets. The armored leader's silhouette flickered on a distant platform, activating runes that made the air hum with charged menace. But before they could close, the pursuing guardian burst through the blockage in a shower of rubble, its remaining eye locking on them with feral hunger, the chase far from over.

The guardian's colossal bulk slammed into the vault's threshold, pulverizing the melted strut into molten slag that splattered across the floor like searing rain. Terry dove left, his shoulder scraping raw against a jagged vein-ridge as he rolled to his feet, emitter humming in his grip. The beast's furnace maw gaped, expelling a gust of superheated ash that singed Elara's sleeve, the fabric curling black before she twisted away, summoning a whip of thorny creepers to lash at its forelimb. Lirael staggered beside her, ribs heaving from prior fractures, and unleashed a jagged bolt that arced toward the guardian's flank—but the air warped, a hallucinatory haze blooming from the obelisk's base, twisting the lightning into harmless sparks that fizzled against stone. "Focus the core!" Terry barked, his voice cutting through the rumble as he pivoted, plasma emitter charging with a whine. The obelisk throbbed faster now, oily rivulets surging into full veins that erupted skyward, birthing clusters of crystalline abominations—jagged shards with scuttling legs that skittered across the vault walls, their edges glinting like shattered obsidian. One cluster detached, plummeting toward Lirael in a chittering mass; she swept her arm, conjuring a gale that hurled them into a buckling pillar, the impact shattering several into powder that dusted her hair like frost. Elara's vines coiled around a protruding tendril from the obelisk, thorns piercing the pulsating black flesh with wet pops, but the vein recoiled, spraying corrosive ichor that ate through her gauntlet, blistering her forearm in a wave of acidic fire. She gritted her teeth, yanking harder to anchor it, her muscles straining as sweat beaded on her brow. "It's feeding off the runes—the leader's priming it for something bigger!" Across the platform, the armored figure paused, gauntleted hand hovering over a glowing panel, his

visor reflecting the chaos in cold blue. He didn't flee; instead, he tapped a sequence, and the obelisk's hum deepened, veins pulsing in sync with the guardian's roars. The beast charged, its ram-limb pistoning forward to smash a alcove, sending debris flying— a chunk grazed Terry's thigh, the blunt thud compressing muscle and forcing a sharp inhale as his leg buckled momentarily, vision blurring from the jolt. Terry fired a lance of plasma, the beam slicing through the air with a crackle, vaporizing a swarm of scuttlers mid-leap and scoring the guardian's hide, black ichor bubbling from the cauterized gash. "Elara, bind its legs—Lirael, chain the veins to ground them!" His words carried an edge, not just command but a veiled prod at Lirael's faltering stance, her stormweave flickering from exhaustion. Lirael shot him a glare, lips thinning, but she complied, her fingers splaying to summon forked surges that leaped from the obelisk's tendrils, rooting them to the floor in crackling webs. The electricity grounded with a thunderclap, the veins convulsing, spawning more abominations that erupted from the ichor pools—hulking forms with crystalline spines that lashed out, one spine whipping across Elara's calf, the barb lodging deep and tearing free with a yank that buckled her knee, blood welling hot and slick. The guardian lunged again, its remaining eye swiveling to fix on Terry, maw clamping shut to build pressure for a ember-blast. He raised a kinetic shield, the field shimmering into existence with a haptic buzz, absorbing the expelled inferno in a burst of deflected heat that scorched the air and left his arms vibrating from the force, sweat stinging his eyes. "Now—sever it!" Elara, limping but resolute, thrust her palms forward, vines exploding from the floor in a tangled barrage, wrapping the obelisk's base and squeezing the central vein until it ruptured, spewing a geyser of oily blight that sizzled on contact with stone. Lirael funneled her gale into a focused vortex, whipping the severed tendrils into a frenzy that battered the crystalline spawns, shards exploding into harmless grit that pelted their skin like hail. Terry amped his emitter to full, unleashing a grid of plasma arcs that lanced through the core, superheating the pulsating mass until it burst in a flare of vaporized corruption, the acrid stench of ozone and charred sugar flooding the vault. The obelisk shuddered, its runes flickering out as the guardian howled, veins across its body dimming, movements slowing to labored heaves. But the cauteri-

zation wasn't clean—the backlash rippled outward, the pedestal at the core's apex surging with holographic static. A projection bloomed unbidden, intercepted transmissions materializing as flickering feeds: syndicate operatives in shadowed bays, discussing convergence coordinates beyond Earth's veil, blueprints overlaying a blight engine that mirrored designs from Terry's father's archives—prototypes meant to harness rifts, now twisted into weapons. "Escape vector confirmed," a distorted voice echoed from the holo. "Convergence at Veilpoint Alpha—father's lattice will amplify the spread." Terry's jaw clenched, emitter dipping as recognition hit, but Elara grabbed his arm, nails digging in. "Not now—it's fracturing!" The chamber floor split with a groan, the vein's death-throes cracking stone into a yawning chasm that belched steam and deeper tremors. From the fissure clambered a new horror—a subterranean guardian, this one a titanic worm-thing armored in rift-forged chitin, its maw ringed with grinding mandibles that pulverized rubble as it rose, segments undulating with embedded veins that pulsed hungrily. Pseudopods whipped from its flanks, one slamming into Lirael's side and flinging her against a wall, the impact jarring her shoulder from socket with a pop that drew a choked gasp, her arm dangling limp as nausea roiled her gut. "Retreat—tunnels, now!" Terry roared, firing a suppressive plasma burst that scorched the worm's leading segment, blackening chitin but barely slowing it. He hauled Lirael up by her good arm, her weight dragging at his bruised leg, every step a grind of fire through his calf. Elara sealed their path with a barrier of woven roots, thorns interlocking like a portcullis, but the worm's pseudopod smashed through, splintering vines and sending splinters embedding in her thigh, the punctures throbbing with each heartbeat. They bolted into a side corridor, the vault collapsing behind in a cascade of boulders that muffled the beast's thrashing. Hallucinatory assaults plagued the flight—phantom scents of burning flesh clawed at their noses, visions of the worm's maw overlaying the walls, making Terry's stomach lurch as he blinked them away, focusing on the emitter's scan for an exit. Lirael's breaths came ragged, her dislocated shoulder bumping the wall and eliciting a hiss. "That holo—your father's work... it's all connected. We can't let it reach convergence." "Save the lecture," Elara snapped, her voice tight as she summoned a breeze to propel them faster, but doubt laced

her tone, fingers flexing around her bowstring. “One wrong seal, and we’re the ones converging with that thing.” The corridor buckled, ceiling sagging as tremors escalated, academy-wide rumbles vibrating through the stone like a dying heartbeat. Terry overloaded a junction panel ahead, sparks erupting to collapse a section and buy seconds, but the worm’s mandibles gnashed closer, pseudopods scraping the walls. They spilled into a narrower passage, the air cooling slightly, but a fresh vein-pulse lit the gloom ahead—another spawn cluster awakening. Elara loosed an arrow tipped with entangling sap, pinning the scuttlers to the floor where they shattered under Lirael’s weakened surge, but the effort left her swaying, vision spotting from blood loss. Terry’s shield deflected a probing tendril, the kinetic rebound numbing his wrist, as they pressed on, the guardian’s bulk forcing the tunnel to widen cracks that threatened to swallow them whole. Deeper quakes shook loose a support beam, crashing across their path; Terry blasted it aside with a plasma lance, the heat wave singeing his hair, while Elara and Lirael scrambled over the wreckage, the worm’s shadow looming ever nearer. The air grew thick with dust and the vein’s sickly sweet reek, every footfall echoing the academy’s peril. They rounded a final bend, bursting into a service alcove where emergency hatches glowed faintly—salvation, if they could seal the pursuit. But the worm surged into view, mandibles parting to unleash a spray of corrosive bile that ate through the floor ahead, forcing them to veer sharply as the guardian rampaged onward.

The bile splashed across the alcove’s threshold, hissing as it gnawed at the metal grating, bubbles foaming up in acrid steam. Terry lunged left, boots skidding on the slick residue, his emitter humming as he scanned for structural weak points in the wall ahead. Right meant exposure to the worm’s bulk; left offered a rusted ladder to an upper vent, but the corrosive spray clawed at his sleeve, fabric unraveling in threads. He gritted his teeth, arm throbbing from the earlier rebound, and fired a plasma lance at the floor beneath the guardian’s maw. The bolt struck true, vaporizing a chunk of stone and sending the worm recoiling with a guttural screech, ichor splattering the walls. Elara hauled Lirael toward the ladder, her free hand weaving roots from the cracked concrete—thorny coils snaking up to brace the rungs against the

quakes. Lirael's face twisted in pain, shoulder joint grinding as she gripped the first step, but she bit back a groan, eyes narrowing on the worm's thrashing form. "Up—now," Elara barked, shoving her higher while loosing a verdant arrow that burrowed into the beast's flank, roots erupting to pin one mandible shut. The guardian bucked, shattering the growth in a spray of sap and shards, but it bought them a breath. Terry scrambled after them, the ladder groaning under his weight as the corridor behind imploded in a roar of dust and rubble. The worm's pseudopods lashed out, one whipping past his boot and cracking the ladder mid-rung; he kicked free, dropping to the next hold, heat from his emitter warming his palm. Vent above—too narrow for the beast, but tight for Lirael's wounds. Stay and fight? No, the scan blinked red: structural integrity at 12%. Retreat meant survival, even if it funneled them deeper. They hauled into the vent, crawling through the dim crawlspace, knees scraping rusted grates. The worm's bulk slammed the alcove below, vibrations rattling their teeth. Elara led, bow slung across her back, fingers probing ahead for blockages. Lirael followed, breaths shallow, her good hand summoning faint gusts to clear the dust-choked air. Terry brought up the rear, emitter pressed to the wall, listening for the scrape of mandibles. A jolt shook the vent; pseudopods probed the entrance, bending metal with wet crunches. "Hub's two levels down," Terry muttered, voice echoing tinny. "Service shaft branches left—straight to the pedestal." He weighed the risks: left risked collapsed supports, straight exposed them to vein clusters. But the worm's roar decided it—left, now. He blasted a weakened panel, plasma searing a hole that dropped them into a sloping chute. They slid out into the nexus hub, rolling across the chamber floor amid sparking conduits and flickering runes. The air hummed with residual energy, but the central vein had erupted fully—a throbbing black artery pulsing from the pedestal's base, oily tendrils whipping like live wires. Crystalline abominations skittered from its fissures, jagged limbs glinting as they converged, ozone tang biting the lungs alongside burnt sugar. Lirael hit the deck hard, shoulder popping audibly; she clamped her jaw, rolling to her knees and channeling a lightning surge that arced across three scuttlers, shattering their forms into glittering powder. Sparks danced on her skin, singeing hair, but the effort steadied her glare. Elara rose fluidly, drawing

her bow—two verdant arrows flew, embedding in a tendril and blooming thorns that tore it from the vein in a gush of ichor. The hub shuddered, walls buckling inward, chunks of ceiling plummeting like hammers. Terry activated his shield, the kinetic field shimmering as a tendril slammed against it, the impact jarring his bones and cracking the floor beneath. He pivoted, assessing: pedestal to the right, vein core exposed but guarded by spawning clusters; left wall offered cover from debris, but blocked the exit shaft. Core first—cauterize it, or the whole hub collapses. He dashed right, plasma emitter charging with a whine, dodging a scuttler's lunge that gashed his calf, blood welling hot. "Vein—hit the pulse point!" he called, lance firing into the artery's bulge. Superheated plasma bored through, steam erupting in a scalding plume that blistered his arm. The vein convulsed, birthing more abominations—hulking crystals with razor edges charging in a wave. Elara flanked left, roots bursting from the floor to ensnare two beasts, thorns piercing carapace and crushing internals with wet snaps. She ducked a swinging limb, rolling under a console that toppled in the quake, its crash shielding her as she nocked another arrow. Lirael staggered up, wind whipping her hair; she unleashed a gale that hurled a scuttler into the wall, embedding it in stone with a crunch, but the backlash twisted her torso, fresh pain lancing her side. Hallucinatory flickers assaulted them—phantom blades slicing air, visions of Sundering warriors materializing with spears that solidified mid-thrust. Terry blinked through the overlay, a ghostly lance grazing his shield and numbing his fingers. He refocused, emitter scanning the core: 40% integrity left. "Elara, bind it—Lirael, surge on my mark!" Tendrils lashed wildly, one coiling around Lirael's ankle and yanking her down; she blasted it with chained lightning, the bolt forking to fry the appendage, but the shock rippled up her leg, muscles seizing. Elara's vines surged forth, thorny masses wrapping the vein's length, squeezing until black fluid wept from punctures. The crystals swarmed closer, claws scraping sparks from the floor. Terry fired again, plasma lancing the core's heart. It ruptured, ichor fountaining in arcs that corroded the pedestal's edge. Lirael timed her tempest, bolts crashing down to supercharge the wound, the combined force melting the vein's rim into slag. Abominations shattered in the backlash, shards pelting the walls like shrapnel, embedding in consoles

with hisses. The hub stabilized, runes flickering back to life, but the pedestal surged—a holographic burst projecting intercepted transmissions. Grainy feeds showed the armored leader fleeing through a rift, voice distorted: "Convergence primed. Father's prototypes integrate the blight—Earth falls first." Schematics scrolled: twisted Nexus-weaves fusing riftblight into engines, multiversal beacons pulsing like hearts. Terry's gut tightened, fist clenching the emitter; his father's face flickered in the holo, blueprints marked with familiar runes. Elara's eyes widened, bow lowering as she stepped closer, roots retracting into the floor. "That's... the weapon. He's building it now." Lirael leaned on a console, fingers digging into the edge, knuckles white. "We end this at convergence." But the vein's death throes hit—a backlash fracture spiderwebbed the chamber floor, stone splitting with a thunderclap. From the depths roared the subterranean guardian, larger than the worm—a colossal beast of fused crystal and flesh, maw lined with serrated plates, limbs like battering rams erupting upward. It clawed free, shaking off rubble, the hub's lights casting jagged shadows across its hide. "Move!" Terry yelled, shield flaring as a paw swiped, cratering the pedestal and hurling debris. He bolted for the exit shaft, calculating: straight tunnel risks the beast's charge, side passage narrower but quaking. Side it is—trap it behind collapses. Elara scooped Lirael's arm over her shoulder, dragging her toward the side passage as vines snapped out to trip the beast's forelimb. It stumbled, roar vibrating the air, but pseudopods extended, probing the gap. Lirael summoned a gust to propel them faster, wind howling through the fracture, but her vision blurred, blood trickling from a scalp cut. The trio dove into the passage, the guardian's bulk slamming the entrance, cracks racing the walls. Tunnels ahead branched into quaking depths—ceiling groaning, floors tilting like waves. Terry blasted a support to widen their path, plasma flash illuminating dripping veins and loose boulders. They scrambled over a fissure, the beast's distant bellows echoing, tremors intensifying as if the academy itself convulsed. Dust choked the air, footing treacherous with slick ichor pools. Elara slipped on one, knee twisting; she caught herself on a jutting pipe, hauling Lirael onward. Another quake bucked the floor, sending them sliding into a debris pile—jagged rebar snagging clothes, drawing blood. Terry's emitter beeped—convergence

signal strengthening ahead. But the passage narrowed, the guardian's scrapes growing louder. A fresh collapse loomed, boulders tumbling. Then, from the depths, a deeper rumble built—not the beast. Something vaster stirred.

Chapter 24: Crystal-Flesh Fury

The nexus hub shuddered like a beast in its death throes, its vaulted ceiling cracking under the weight of the colossal guardian that had burst from the riftblight vein. Jagged facets of obsidian crystal sheathed its hulking form, pulsing with veins of oily black ichor that dribbled onto the ferrocrete floor, sizzled as it etched furrows into the metal. Tendrils of fused flesh and shard whipped through the air, each lash cracking like thunder and sending sprays of corrosive fluid that burned the air with the acrid tang of ozone and scorched caramel. Terry skidded across the debris-strewn floor, his plasma emitter buzzing in his grip. He thrust it forward, unleashing lances of superheated plasma that streaked blue-white and slammed into the guardian's crystalline protrusions. The impacts bloomed into molten craters, shards exploding outward in a hail of glittering fragments that pinged off his kinetic shield like erratic hailstones. "Anchor it down—Elara, now!" he bellowed, pivoting to dodge a sweeping tendril that pulverized a nearby console into sparking wreckage. Elara dropped to one knee amid the rubble, her fingers digging into the cracked earth where riftblight had warped the academy's synthetic soil. Thorny vines erupted from her palms, coiling upward like iron cables overgrown with barbs, and lashed out to ensnare the guardian's lower limbs. The tendrils strained against the bindings, fibers snapping with wet pops as the creature thrashed, but the vines held, drawing beads of ichor that sizzled on contact. She glanced at Lirael, her jaw set in a tight line. "If we don't sync the strikes, it'll just knit back—aim for the fissures!" Lirael nodded sharply, her windswept hair whipping as she channeled a surge of stormweave. Arcs of lightning leaped from her outstretched hands, chaining through the air with a deafening crackle that lit the hub in stark, flickering blue. The bolts hammered the guardian's regenerative core—a throbbing nexus of crystal and flesh at its chest—disrupting the oily pulses

that fed its mending. Sparks danced across its surface, fracturing a protrusion into a cascade of razor-edged splinters that rained down, one slicing a shallow gash across her forearm. She hissed through clenched teeth but didn't falter, her free hand clenching into a fist as she funneled more power, the air growing thick with the metallic bite of ionized ozone. The guardian bellowed, a guttural roar that vibrated the walls and loosed a swarm of jagged shards from its hide. They hurtled like shrapnel from a grenade, embedding in the ferrocrete and ricocheting with lethal unpredictability. Terry's shield flared as a cluster struck it, the kinetic backlash jolting his arms and numbing his fingers. One shard grazed Elara's shoulder, tearing through her leather bracer and drawing a line of blood that welled hot and sticky. She staggered but twisted her vines tighter, the thorns piercing deeper into the creature's flesh, anchoring it mid-lunge. Lirael leaped aside as a tendril cratered the floor where she'd stood, the impact sending up a plume of dust laced with glittering corruption. Her lightning faltered for a heartbeat, the guardian's core flickering back to life, knitting crystal over a fresh plasma scar. "Terry, the core's pulling from the vein—cut the feed!" she called, her voice edged with urgency as she unleashed another gale-force bolt, the electricity grounding into a nearby riftblight spur with an explosive sizzle that vaporized a section of the vein. Terry's eyes narrowed on the nexus anchor—a pulsating pedestal at the creature's base, where the riftblight vein rooted like a malignant taproot. He charged forward, boots crunching over shattered console shards, and slammed his emitter's overload probe into the pedestal's surface. Energy buzzed through the device, building to a whine that drowned out the guardian's roars. "On my mark—pour everything into it!" The air warped around the anchor as plasma began to bleed from his emitter, superheating the crystal until it glowed cherry-red. Elara reinforced her vines, the growths thickening with a grind of straining fibers, while Lirael summoned a torrent of lightning that arced from ceiling conduits to the anchor, the combined forces igniting a chain reaction. The guardian reared, its tendrils flailing wildly, one clipping Terry's side and hurling him against a buckling wall. Ribs protested with a sharp crack, pain blooming like fire under his skin, but he held the probe firm. The overload peaked in a blinding flash, the anchor erupting in a cataclysmic blast

of ichor and debris. Shards flew in all directions, embedding in walls and flesh alike; Elara shielded her face as a fragment gashed her thigh, blood soaking her trousers in a warm rush, while Lirael's arm took a glancing blow that fractured bone with a sickening snap. The guardian convulsed, its colossal frame shattering from the core outward. Crystal facets exploded in a symphony of cracks, tendrils whipping one final time before going limp, collapsing into a steaming heap of twitching remnants. Ichor pooled across the hub floor, bubbling and hissing as it corroded the metal into pitted craters. The air hung heavy with the stench of burnt sugar and molten rock, the convulsions of the academy fading to ominous rumbles from below. Panting, Terry yanked the probe free, his side throbbing with each breath. He pushed to his feet, waving off Elara's instinctive reach to steady him. "Keep moving—depths are next." Lirael cradled her fractured arm, her face paling as she tested its weight, but she shot Elara a quick nod. "Vines first for barricades. No sense charging blind." They plunged into the quaking passages beyond the hub, the corridors twisting like the innards of some vast, dying organism. Walls buckled with grinding groans, riftblight veins throbbing faintly in the dim emergency lights that flickered like dying stars. Shards from the guardian's demise crunched underfoot, and the air grew cooler, laced with the damp rot of unearthed stone. Terry led, emitter at the ready, its glow casting long shadows that danced with the tremors. A side alcove yawned open, its console half-buried under collapsed paneling. Elara knelt beside it, thorns retracting from her hands as she pried open the access port with a vine-wrapped dagger. Holographic fragments flickered to life—distorted logs scrolling with syndicate insignias and schematics of veined engines. "Look—prototypes for amplification grids," she murmured, her fingers tracing a rune that stabilized the projection. One log snippet glitched into view: coordinates marking a vaster awakening below, tied to "subterranean convergence nodes." Lirael's good hand gripped the alcove's edge, knuckles whitening as another rumble shook loose dust from the ceiling. "That's no isolated breach. They're priming something immense down there." She met Terry's gaze, her stance shifting to favor the injured arm. "We hit it coordinated, or we don't hit it at all." Terry interfaced his emitter with the console, downloading the fragments in a rush of data streams

that burned across his neural implant. The logs hinted at a colossal threat stirring in the academy's foundations—something beyond guardians, a convergence that could tear open stable rifts across the continent. Alarms blared distantly, new corruptions stirring with wet, slithering sounds from the depths. Elara sealed the console with a twist of vine, rising as the group pressed onward. Seismic rumbles intensified, the floor tilting underfoot. They rounded a corner into a wider vault, where fresh veins pulsed against the walls, and Lirael raised her uninjured hand, lightning coiling at her fingertips in readiness.

The vault's ceiling groaned like fracturing bone, chunks of reinforced plasteel raining down in a staccato barrage. Terry ducked as a slab the size of his torso slammed into the floor beside him, splintering into jagged edges that skittered across the tiles. The pulsing veins along the walls thickened, their oily black surfaces bulging with internal pressure, and from the heart of the chamber rose a low, resonant hum that vibrated through his boots. Lirael's lightning crackled brighter in her palm, arcs snapping toward the veins like probing fingers, but she held back, eyes narrowing at the central pedestal where riftblight gathered in a swirling nexus. "Anchor point," Terry barked, his emitter humming as he scanned the anomaly. He weighed the angles—blast the veins to starve it, or target the pedestal to collapse the whole mess? The risk of feedback surge held him: one miscalibrated lance could ignite the corruption and bury them all. Goal clear—disrupt before it fully manifests. He pivoted left, toward a cluster of exposed conduits snaking from the floor, their casings already corroding into fleshy ridges. Before he could fire, the pedestal erupted in a geyser of ichor, the riftblight birthing the colossal crystal-flesh guardian in a thunderous upheaval. It uncoiled from the breach like a nightmare forged in a forge of nightmares: a hulking mass of translucent crystal laced with veined meat, its torso a bulbous core throbbing with bioluminescent pulses, flanked by writhing tendrils tipped in razor barbs. Towering twice the height of the vault, it let out a screech that pierced the air, the sound of glass grinding against bone, carrying the acrid tang of ozone mingled with charred meat. Elara loosed a vine arrow from her bow, the projectile whistling through the haze to bury into a tendril's base. Roots exploded outward in

a fibrous tangle, snapping with wet cracks as they coiled and squeezed, but the appendage flexed, crystals reforming around the bindings with audible creaks. “Flank it—left conduit!” she called, rolling right to avoid a sweeping barb that gouged the wall, sending sparks flying from severed wiring. Her boots slid on the slick ichor pooling beneath, the substance burning through her soles with a sizzle, forcing her to leap onto a toppled beam for footing. The guardian retaliated with a lash of its primary limb, the crystal-flesh appendage slamming down like a battering ram. Terry threw up a kinetic shield, the energy field shimmering blue as it absorbed the impact—cracks spiderwebbing across the barrier, the recoil jolting his arms numb. Shards ejected from the strike, a swarm of needle-sharp fragments peppering the air; one grazed his shoulder, tearing fabric and drawing a hot line of blood that soaked his sleeve. He gritted his teeth, tasting copper on his tongue, and countered with a plasma lance—superheated bolt lancing from his emitter, slamming into a crystalline protrusion on the beast’s flank. The crystal shattered in a burst of steam and molten droplets, the guardian recoiling with a bellow that shook loose more debris from above. Lirael channeled her stormweave, her good hand thrusting forward as tempests gathered. Wind howled through the vault, whipping dust and ichor into a stinging gale, but she funneled it into a surge of lightning that arced toward the core. Bolts forked and hammered the throbbing mass, electricity dancing across its surface in blue-white flares, the smell of singed flesh intensifying. The guardian’s core flickered, regeneration stuttering as chunks sloughed off in sizzling clumps, yet it adapted—tendrils whipping to intercept, one coiling around her ankle and yanking her off-balance. She crashed to one knee, the injured arm flaring agony, but twisted free with a gust that propelled her backward, vines from Elara snagging the tendril mid-thrash to haul it down. Terry dashed forward, emitter overclocking with a whine, considering the pedestal’s base—overloaded, it could chain-react through the anchor. But the beast’s bulk blocked direct access, its stomping footfalls cratering the floor and sending tremors that buckled a support beam overhead. He feinted right, drawing a swipe that missed by inches, the wind of it ruffling his hair, then lunged left to jam his device into a vein feeding the pedestal. “Elara, bind the legs—immobilize! Lirael, core again, but pull back on

intensity—don't fry the circuits!" Elara nocked another arrow, this one laced with thorn extract, firing it into the guardian's lower joints. The impact bloomed roots that wormed into the crystal-flesh seams, erupting in a lattice that locked the limbs with grinding resistance. The beast strained, muscles bulging beneath the translucent hide, barbs scraping furrows into the stone as it tore partially free, shards flying like shrapnel. One cluster embedded in Lirael's thigh as she repositioned, the pain buckling her stance; she snarled, clamping a hand over the wound to stem the blood seeping warm and sticky. The guardian's core pulsed faster, retaliatory swarms spawning from fractured protrusions—jagged shards detaching and hurtling like launched grenades. Terry shielded Elara as a volley cratered the wall behind them, the explosion's heat singeing his neck, while Lirael unleashed a chained lightning torrent that bridged from tendril to core, the strikes illuminating the vault in staccato flashes. The electricity grounded through the veins, the guardian's form convulsing, crystals fracturing with pops like gunfire. Ichor sprayed in arcs, splattering the floor and hissing against metal, the burnt sugar stench choking the air. Seizing the gap, Terry initiated the overload—his emitter interfacing with the pedestal's runes, data streams flooding his implant in a burning rush. The anchor hummed, building to a crescendo, but the guardian lunged, a tendril spearing toward him. Elara intercepted with a vine whip, the fibrous lash cracking against the appendage and redirecting it into the wall, where it embedded with a crunch. Lirael followed with a gale-force blast, wind shoving the beast back a step, buying seconds. The pedestal ignited, plasma feedback surging through the veins in a web of azure fire. The guardian's core detonated in a cataclysmic bloom—ichor erupting in geysers, crystal shards exploding outward like a grenade's payload. Terry dove behind a console remnant, the shockwave hurling him against the vault's edge, ribs protesting with sharp stabs. Elara shielded Lirael with her body, thorns extending to form a hasty barrier that splintered under the debris hail, gashes opening across her back from flying fragments. The beast's remnants collapsed in a heap of twitching flesh and glittering refuse, the vault trembling as secondary veins ruptured, spewing oily blackness that corroded the floor into pitted craters. Panting, Terry pushed to his feet, emitter sparking from the strain, blood trickling from his shoul-

der to stain the shards underfoot. The air reeked of scorched circuits and ozone, the ground still quaking with aftershocks. "Clear—move!" He grabbed Elara's arm, hauling her up as she winced, her fingers digging into his sleeve with white-knuckled grip. Lirael limped after, lightning fading from her hand, her face ashen from blood loss. They bolted through the vault's far archway, the passages beyond a labyrinth of buckling arches and flickering lumens. Walls wept ichor, forcing detours around pooling corrosion that ate through boots and stone alike. A collapsed section blocked their path—Terry blasted it with a low-yield plasma burst, the rubble shifting just enough to squeeze through, his shoulders scraping raw against the edges. Emerging into a narrower chute, the air grew stifling, laced with the damp rot of deeper earth. Elara spotted a flickering panel midway down, half-obscured by a fallen girder. She wedged her dagger beneath it, prying with a grunt, vines assisting to lever the metal aside. Holographic shards materialized—garbled feeds of syndicate ops, schematics of convergence nodes buried in the academy's bedrock. One fragment stabilized under her touch: a map pulsing with red overlays, marking a subterranean hub where rifts converged, primed for "total amplification." The logs whispered of a vaster entity, not guardian but progenitor—something colossal stirring in the foundations, its awakening tied to the blight's weaponized core. Lirael's breath hitched as she leaned against the wall, pressing her good hand to her thigh wound, blood slicking her fingers. "That's the heart of it—below the underbelly. They're fusing realms down there." Her eyes flicked to Terry, stance rigid despite the pain. "We dive coordinated, overload the nodes, or it all unravels." Terry slotted his emitter into the panel, siphoning the data in jagged bursts that lit his vision with overlays. The intel burned: the syndicate's endgame, a blight engine to mutate continents, blueprints echoing his father's forbidden weaves. Alarms wailed closer, slithering echoes rising from the depths—new corruptions uncoiling with fleshy rasps. He yanked the device free, nodding sharply. "Regroup here—barricade the chute. Elara, vines on the entrance. Lirael, storm the veins if they push." Elara extended her arms, thorns blooming to weave a lattice across the passage mouth, roots anchoring into cracks with fibrous snaps. Lirael summoned a low crackle of electricity, channeling it into the walls to cauterize a probing vein that snaked toward them,

the sizzle filling the air with acrid smoke. Seismic rumbles deepened, the chute vibrating as if the earth itself recoiled, distant roars hinting at the progenitor's stirrings. Terry crouched by the panel's remnants, emitter recharging with a faint whine, scanning for the next descent route amid the intensifying groans of stone. A fresh tremor bucked the floor, forcing him to brace against the wall, shards from above pattering like hail as the group huddled, weapons primed for the plunge below.

The floor heaved again, a guttural groan echoing from the stone like bones grinding in a colossal jaw. Terry's emitter pinged ready, its glow casting erratic shadows on the barricade of thorns that Elara's vines had woven tight. He rose, slinging the device onto his belt, eyes locked on the map's pulsing overlay in his visor—twisting conduits snaking downward, converging on that buried hub. "Descent's our shot," he said, voice clipped. "Emitter leads; cauterize any veins we hit. No stragglers." Elara's fingers flexed around her bowstring, a thorned arrow nocked. She glanced at the chute's maw, lips pressing thin as roots coiled tighter across the entrance, splintering duracrete with audible cracks. "Tighten the weave first—those rumbles'll shred loose ends." Her stance shifted, boots scraping for purchase on the buckling slab, signaling her push for reinforced cover before the drop. Lirael channeled a fresh arc of electricity into the probing vein, the flesh sizzling black and retracting with a wet hiss. Sparks danced along her arm, singeing her sleeve. She wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, gaze narrowing at the holographic map. "Coordinated dive means no blind leaps—storm the anchors as we fall, or we'll be buried alive." Her free hand clenched into a fist, knuckles whitening, underscoring her demand for sequenced strikes over Terry's rush. Another quake ripped through, dislodging the girder overhead. It plummeted in a screech of metal, forcing Terry to dive aside; the impact sprayed gravel that pelted his shoulder like buckshot, bruising flesh beneath his jacket. Elara's vines lashed out, snaring the beam mid-fall and hurling it against the wall with a resonant clang. Lirael's lightning forked to illuminate the chute below—a yawning vertical shaft, walls veined with oily black pulses that throbbed in rhythm with the tremors, air thick with the metallic tang of exposed conduits and the sickly sweet char

of brewing blight. Terry activated his emitter, a kinetic shield flickering to life around his forearm, humming with contained force. He stepped to the edge, peering into the abyss where faint, bioluminescent glows flickered like dying embers. “On my mark—” The ground split without warning. A rift vein erupted from the floor, spewing shards of crystallized corruption that skittered like shattered glass across the stone. One sliced Lirael’s calf as she pivoted, drawing a sharp hiss from her lips; blood welled, hot and sticky, soaking her boot before she stamped it down, cauterizing the wound with a self-inflicted spark that made her leg buckle briefly. Elara loosed her arrow into the vein’s heart, thorns blooming to rupture it from within, ichor bubbling out in foul, viscous ropes. Terry fired a plasma lance into the breach, superheated blue fire melting the crystal to slag that hissed and steamed, filling the air with ozone and molten rock stench. But the damage spread. The chute’s lip crumbled, and the trio tumbled into the void. Terry’s shield expanded in a desperate flare, cushioning his fall against the shaft’s irregular walls; he bounced off a protrusion, ribs jarring with a thud that expelled his breath in a whoosh, pain blooming sharp under his sternum. Elara twisted mid-air, vines erupting from her palms to grapple a jutting pipe, slowing her descent with fibrous creaks that strained her shoulders, muscles burning from the abrupt halt. Lirael summoned a gust of wind, propelling her downward in controlled bursts, but a loose shard clipped her elbow on the way past, numbing the joint and sending a jolt that made her arm hang limp for a heartbeat. They plummeted into the nexus hub’s undercroft, landing amid a chamber of fractured vaults and sparking relays. The air hung heavy, saturated with the reek of scorched wiring and the cloying rot of unearthed soil, lit by erratic strobes from ruptured panels. Walls buckled inward, duracrete groaning as riftblight veins snaked across them like living tattoos, pulsing with inner fire. No time to orient. The floor ruptured centrally, birthing the colossal crystal-flesh guardian in a spray of debris and ichor. It rose on haunches of jagged quartz fused to writhing muscle, towering thrice their height, its form a hulking fusion of translucent spines and pulsating meat that wept oily black fluid. Crystalline protrusions jutted from its torso like spear tips, glinting under the strobes, while tendrils of sinew lashed the air with wet slaps. A low bellow emanated from its core, vi-

brating the chamber bones-deep, accompanied by the acrid scent of ionized air and caramelized blood. “Flank it!” Terry barked, rolling to his feet and unleashing a plasma lance. The beam struck a crystalline arm, shattering a protrusion into a rain of razor shards that clattered across the floor. The guardian recoiled, flesh bubbling where heat met corruption, but regeneration knit the gap with fibrous snaps. Elara darted left, bow singing as thorns embedded in a tendril, vines surging forth to ensnare it. The limb thrashed, yanking her forward; she dug heels into the stone, thorns anchoring her boots with piercing crunches, but the pull wrenched her wrist, tendons straining until she released the weave with a snap. “Pin the core—vines can’t hold forever!” She nocked another arrow, her jaw set firm, revealing her tactical lean toward binding before the breach. Lirael veered right, good arm whipping up a lightning surge that arced toward the beast’s underbelly. Bolts chained across its flesh, charring strips to crisp husks that peeled away in acrid wisps, but the guardian swatted at her with a massive paw, the blow glancing her shield of wind. The impact hurled her sideways, slamming her into a console; the collision jarred her spine, vertebrae protesting with a flare of fire that stole her breath, leaving her coughing amid sparks. “Disrupt the nexus link—storm it steady!” Her voice cracked like thunder, her limp arm dangling as she rose, emphasizing sustained assault over sporadic hits. The guardian lunged, its bellow shaking loose ceiling chunks that plummeted like boulders. Terry’s shield deflected one, the force reverberating up his arm and numbing his fingers, while shards from its fractured protrusions swarmed like hornets—jagged flecks embedding in Elara’s thigh as she dodged, drawing a grunt; the punctures wept blood, each breath pulling at the embedded crystals like hooks in meat. Lirael unleashed another gale, scattering the shards, but a tendril coiled around her ankle mid-stride, yanking her off-balance; she crashed to her knees, the jolt cracking her patella with a sickening pop, pain lancing up her leg as she severed the limb with a point-blank bolt that sizzled flesh to steam. Terry spotted the vulnerability—a glowing nexus anchor at its base, throbbing with rift energy. “There—the anchor! Overload it!” He charged his emitter, plasma building to a whine. Elara’s vines lashed out anew, coiling around the anchor’s rim, thorns grinding into crystal with grating rasps. She braced against

the pull, sweat beading on her forehead, a quick nod to Lirael signaling her approval of the target lock. Lirael hobbled forward, channeling lightning into the vines; electricity surged through the bindings, superheating them to molten fury. The guardian roared, spines flaring as it battered the walls, fracturing stone into avalanches that buried a relay in rubble. One slab clipped Terry's shoulder on the rebound, dislocating the joint with a wrenching pop; he gasped, vision blurring from the white-hot agony, but held his emitter steady. The combined assault hit. Plasma lanced into the anchor, vines constricted to crushing pressure, lightning chained in explosive loops. The core overloaded in a cataclysmic burst—ichor erupting in geysers that scalded the air, crystal shattering into a storm of debris that pelted them like hailstones. The guardian convulsed, its form fracturing into collapsing segments, bellow fading to wet gurgles as chunks slumped to the floor in steaming piles. Debris rained. Terry shoved Elara aside from a falling beam; it grazed his back instead, the weight driving him to his hands and knees, spine arching in protest as bruises bloomed instant and deep. Lirael limped clear, but a shard embedded in her boot, piercing sole to floor; she yanked free with a muffled curse, the puncture throbbing with each step. They fled into quaking passages beyond, the hub collapsing in their wake—walls shearing with metallic shrieks, veins bursting to flood the air with corrosive mist that burned throats and eyes. Elara pried open a side panel mid-sprint, holographic shards flickering to life: garbled logs of syndicate rites, whispers of a progenitor entity rousing in the bedrock, its veins threading toward "convergence ignition." One feed stabilized—a schematic of amplification nodes, pulsing red, deeper still. Lirael snatched a fragment, her fractured knee buckling as she scanned it, fingers trembling on the edge. "Progenitor's the key—nodes amplify its wake. We hit them sequenced." She tucked the shard away, limping onward, her rigid posture underscoring the need for precision amid the rout. Terry's dislocated shoulder screamed with each jostle, but he forced his emitter to interface a wall conduit, downloading the rest in frantic bursts. Alarms blared from ahead, slithering rasps rising anew—fresh corruptions uncoiling from the depths. Elara reinforced a vine bridge over a chasm, roots burrowing into fissures with urgent snaps, her glance back at Terry sharp, urging anchored footing before the

next plunge. Seismic rumbles swelled, the passage vibrating as if the world clenched in agony. Distant roars built, fleshy and immense, stirring from below. The trio pressed into the gloom, boots crunching over loose crystal, emitters and bows at ready as a new vein pulsed into view, blocking the way with throbbing menace. Terry raised his good arm, plasma charging with a building hum.

Terry's plasma lance ignited, a searing blue-white beam that lanced forward, slicing into the vein's pulsating core. The corruption recoiled with a wet, sucking pop, black ichor spraying in arcs that sizzled against the stone floor, filling the air with acrid ozone and the cloying sweetness of charred caramel. Chunks of the vein sloughed off, writhing like severed worms before crystallizing into brittle spikes that skittered underfoot. Elara darted left, her boots scraping for purchase on the uneven ledge. She weighed the gap to the vein's flank—too wide for a leap with Lirael's limp slowing them. Instead, she slammed her palm against the wall, roots erupting in a frenzy of splintering cracks, coiling around the vein's base like iron cables. The tendrils tightened, thorns gouging deep furrows, but the corruption pushed back, bulging the roots with oily protrusions that fused bark to flesh-textured sludge. Lirael favored her good leg, bowstring humming as she nocked an arrow. Firing blind into the vein's apex risked shattering the passage's fragile ceiling—loose rubble already pattered down like warning shots. She pivoted right, channeling a gust that whipped her hair across her face, the wind funneling debris into a makeshift barrier. It bought seconds, but the vein throbbed harder, spawning needle-like barbs that whistled through the air. "Flank it low!" Terry barked, his voice raw from the mist's bite. He ignored the grind in his shoulder, emitter recalibrating with a faint whine. The immediate goal: carve a path without collapsing the tunnel entirely. Risk of ricochet from plasma held him from full power—too much, and the vein's shards could impale them all. Elara nodded, sweat beading on her brow as she yanked a root free, redirecting it to lasso a protruding cyst. The vein bucked, slamming her back against the wall; her ribs compressed with a dull thud, breath hitching in sharp stabs that made her vision spot. She gritted her teeth, twisting the root until the cyst burst in a foul spray, the stench turning her stomach. Lirael's

gale intensified, hurling barbs aside in clattering bursts. One grazed her forearm, tearing fabric and skin in a shallow furrow that wept blood, the sting like frostbite's edge. She loosed her arrow, the tip crackling with static, embedding in the vein's midpoint. Lightning arced from the impact, chaining through the corruption in jagged forks that vaporized segments into steam clouds, the hiss echoing like boiling pitch. The vein shuddered, its advance halting as fissures spiderwebbed across its surface. Terry followed with a controlled pulse, the plasma eroding the core until it deflated, collapsing into a steaming puddle that etched pits into the floor. The passage cleared, but tremors rattled the walls, dislodging a slab that crashed inches from Lirael's feet, the impact jarring her pierced sole and sending fresh pain lancing up her calf. They stumbled forward, breaths ragged in the confined gloom. The air grew thicker, laced with the vein's residue—floors slick with residue that clung to boots like tar, forcing deliberate steps to avoid slipping into fissures. Terry's emitter flickered, its interface port clogged with crystal flecks; he scraped it clean against his thigh, wincing as the motion wrenched his dislocated joint, a deep ache radiating to his fingertips. Fifty paces in, the passage widened into a jagged alcove, walls veined with faint, dormant pulses like buried lightning. Elara slumped against a outcrop, her fingers digging into the stone, knuckles whitening as she scanned for stability. No immediate collapse, but the rock hummed with tension, dust sifting from cracks overhead. She considered weaving a quick brace—roots to shore the ceiling—but the corruption's taint might twist them against her. Instead, she rummaged in her satchel, pulling a vial of murky elixir. The liquid burned her throat going down, a fiery knit against her bruised ribs, but it dulled the edge enough to straighten without gasping. Lirael eased down beside her, propping her bow across her knees. Her fractured knee swelled beneath the torn fabric, each flex sending a jolt that made her jaw clench. She eyed the holographic shard in her palm, thumbing its edge where a hairline crack threatened to corrupt the data. Activating it risked a surge—better to wait until Terry's emitter stabilized. But the rumbles below urged haste; she glanced at him, her posture rigid, silently pressing for the download. Terry paced the alcove's perimeter, one hand braced on the wall to steady his shoulder. The sling he'd improvised from a strip of cloak chafed his neck,

but it kept the joint immobile. He interfaced the shard with his device, code scrolling in frantic lines: amplification nodes, sequenced like fuses in a bomb. The progenitor—some bedrock horror, its veins threading the academy's foundations—stirred toward "convergence," a ritual to ignite multiversal rifts on a planetary scale. His father's blueprints flickered in the feed, twisted into this nightmare: Nexus-weaves fused with blight to birth engines of chaos. A smirk tugged his lip as he traced a rune on the emitter's screen—archaic fools thought seals enough; his precision could dismantle it node by node. But Elara's sharp glance cut through, her fingers pausing on the vial. She saw the overconfidence in his steady gaze, the way he dismissed the vein's residue still bubbling at their feet. "We sequence the nodes, but not blind," Lirael said, voice low and edged, breaking the hum of the device. She shifted, wincing as her boot's puncture wept fluid, staining the floor. "Your plasma's volatile here—blight amplifies feedback. My gales can scout vents ahead, map the paths without committing." Terry met her eyes, his free hand flexing around the emitter. Fleeing deeper meant trusting her winds over his scans—risk of false readings in the corruption's haze. But the alternative: bull through, emitter overheating from residue. He nodded curtly, the concession tightening his jaw. "Fine. Scout left fork first. Elara, bind any stirrings." Elara rose, rolling her shoulders to test the ribs—tender, but functional. She extended a hand, palm down; slender shoots unfurled from the floor, probing the alcove's edges with tentative curls. One brushed a dormant vein, eliciting a low hiss as the corruption oozed, trying to ensnare the green. She severed it with a flick, the shoot retracting in a snap, but not before a droplet splashed her wrist, raising welts like acid kisses. The alcove trembled anew, a deeper groan rising from the earth—fleshy, resonant, like lungs expanding in the stone. Dust cascaded in veils, coating their skin in gritty film. Lirael stood, bow in hand, her stance wide to distribute weight off the bad knee. She summoned a probing gust, the air swirling into a vortex that funneled down the left fork, carrying echoes back: drips of ichor, skittering claws on crystal, a wet rasp like breathing. "Clear for twenty meters," she reported, though her fingers tightened on the bowstring, betraying the lie in the air's thickening chill. "But something shifts—veins coiling tighter." Terry pocketed the shard, emitter secured. His

shoulder throbbed with the motion, a reminder of the hub's fury, but he pushed it down, focusing on the fork's mouth. The right path tempted—straighter, per the schematic—but scans showed vein clusters, a potential ambush. Left it was, risks be damned. They moved as one, Elara's shoots trailing like scouts, Lirael's winds whispering warnings. The passage narrowed, walls pressing in with crystalline growths that scraped sleeves and caught hair. A low pulse echoed from below, syncing with their footsteps, the ground undulating in subtle waves that upset balance. Terry stumbled once, catching himself on a protrusion; it yielded like flesh, warm and slick, forcing him to jerk back, bile rising at the contact. Deeper still, the air cooled, carrying faint vibrations—rasps building to a chorus, as if the bedrock whispered secrets in tongues of stone and slime. Elara's shoots recoiled from a side crevice, alerting to a fresh sprout: a thin vein probing the air, tipped with barbs that quivered like antennae. She lashed it with a thicker root, the impact crushing it flat, but the severance sprayed residue that clung to her glove, corroding the leather in fizzing holes. Lirael halted, hand raised. Her gale returned, laced with urgency—carrying the scent of ozone sharpened by sugar, and something heavier: the musk of awakening rot. "Nodes ahead," she murmured, eyes narrowing at the fork's end, where a chamber yawned, lit by bioluminescent veins pulsing in rhythm. Shadows stirred within, forms uncoiling with deliberate slowness. Terry's emitter beeped, overlaying the schematic: three nodes, interlinked, guarding the progenitor's primary vein. Overload one wrong, and the chain reaction could bury them—or worse, accelerate the stirrings below. He glanced at Elara, her face set in quiet resolve, then Lirael, whose limp masked a coiled readiness. Friction simmered—his tech versus their weaves—but survival demanded fusion. They crept to the chamber's lip, boots silent on the slick stone. The nodes loomed: obelisk-like protrusions, etched with runes that glowed sickly green, surrounded by writhing lesser veins that fused crystal to pulsating meat. A hulking shape shifted in the gloom beyond, its outline blurring—flesh armored in jagged facets, breath a rumbling bellow that shook loose pebbles. Elara's fingers clenched her bow, vines coiling at her feet in anticipation. Lirael drew a breath, tempests gathering in her palms with crackling sparks. Terry primed his lance, the hum a low promise of fire. But the

chamber's floor buckled first, a fissure splitting wide to belch steam and ichor. From the depths, a claw—immense, veined with crystal and throbbing muscle—clawed upward, gouging rifts that swallowed light.

Chapter 25: Claws of the Progenitor

The chamber throbbed with a low, guttural vibration, as if the academy's bones themselves were groaning under the weight of buried secrets. Flickering emergency lumens cast jagged shadows across the vaulted space, where walls of reinforced alloy buckled inward like crumpled foil. At the heart pulsed a titanic conduit of taint, thick as a transport tube and veined with oily black ichor that wept from fissures in the stone floor. Three orbs hovered around it, fist-sized spheres of sickly green light etched with syndicate runes, their glow pulsing in sync with the conduit's rhythmic swells. Terry skidded to a halt on the slick grating, his boots scraping against crystalline residue that crunched like brittle glass. He scanned the layout in a heartbeat: left orb shielded by a spray of barbed tendrils, right one dangling over a pit of bubbling corrosion, central sphere closest but exposed to the conduit's core. The immediate goal burned clear—shatter those orbs before the conduit could feed whatever slumbered below. Risk loomed in the open approach; one wrong step, and the floor could swallow them whole. He flicked his wrist emitter to life, the device humming as it drew ambient mana into superheated coils. "Elara, vines on the left—bind it tight. Lirael, chain the right to ground it. I'll take center and draw fire." Elara nodded, her jaw set in a line that spoke of coiled restraint, fingers already flexing around her bowstring. She loosed an arrow tipped with a seed pod, the shaft burrowing into the left orb's base before erupting in a tangle of thorny vines that lashed outward like living cables. The barbs rasped against the sphere, drawing sparks of green energy that sizzled on contact, filling the air with the acrid tang of scorched resin. Lirael crouched low, her cloak snapping in an updraft from the conduit's heat, eyes narrowing as she weighed the jump to the right orb—too far, with that pit yawning below. She channeled instead, palms slamming against the grating to summon a web of crackling azure arcs. The lightning chains

leaped from her hands, forking through the air with a whip-crack that echoed off the walls, latching onto the sphere and yanking it downward. Metal groaned as the orb dragged across the edge of the pit, tendrils flailing to retaliate. But the conduit stirred first. A seismic jolt bucked the floor, hurling Terry sideways; he caught himself on a jutting pipe, the impact jarring his elbow with a spike of pain. From the conduit's apex, a titanic talon erupted—titanic and armored in jagged crystal-flesh, each claw dripping viscous barbs that hissed on contact with the air. It lashed out, carving furrows in the grating with a screech like nails on hull plating, sending shards flying that peppered Elara's shoulder. She hissed, blood welling through her torn sleeve, but didn't falter, her vines coiling tighter to haul the left orb closer. "Flank it!" Terry barked, rolling to his feet and unleashing a lance of superheated plasma from his emitter. The beam struck the talon's joint with a thunderous crack, melting crystalline armor into slag that bubbled and popped, releasing puffs of ozone-scented steam. The talon recoiled, but not before spawning a swarm of crystalline tendrils—slender, whip-like appendages that burst from its hide like splintered roots, scuttling across the floor toward Lirael. She pivoted, boots sliding on the slick surface, considering a full tempest to fry the swarm but holding back—the backlash might overload her channels, leaving her vulnerable to the talon's next swipe. Instead, she funneled a targeted bolt, the electricity arcing through the tendrils in a chain reaction that shattered them into glittering dust. Fragments rained down, one slicing her cheek open; she wiped the blood away with a grimace, tasting copper on her lips. The air grew thick, charged with more than just energy. A wave of nausea slammed into Terry's gut like a battering ram, his vision blurring as the chamber warped—Elara's form twisted in his sight, her vines sprouting into coiling serpents that lunged for his throat. He blinked hard, shaking his head against the dizzying spin, the illusion carrying the phantom weight of scales brushing his skin. It wasn't real, but the bile rising in his throat was, forcing him to swallow against the metallic fear coating his tongue. He fired another plasma lance at the central sphere, the beam grazing the orb and cracking its rune-etched shell, but the hallucinatory assault left his aim wavering. Elara grunted, her own grip faltering as phantom smoke filled her nostrils, choking her lungs while the left orb's

vines writhed unnaturally, thorns piercing her palms in imagined stabs. She clenched her teeth, ignoring the sting, and yanked harder, the sphere tumbling free to smash against the conduit. Green light flared, then dimmed, but the talon retaliated with a barbed swipe that caught Lirael's leg, tearing fabric and flesh in a spray of blood. She staggered, knee buckling from the corrosive burn that ate at the wound like acid, the pain a white-hot lance that made her gasp. "Console—now!" Terry shouted over the din, lunging for a nearby pedestal half-buried in debris. His fingers danced across the interface, emitter syncing to download the schematics as the talon loomed again. Holographic projections flickered to life mid-air: rune diagrams pulsing with syndicate markings, blueprints of a ritual to siphon the progenitor's essence, twisting it into a weaponized blight engine. Ties to his father's old prototypes glared in the data streams—Nexus-weaves corrupted, conduits amplified for multiversal spread. The revelation hit like a shock, but he shoved it down, focusing on the transfer bar inching toward completion. The ground heaved, seismic shocks rippling outward and cracking the chamber walls, dislodging chunks of ceiling that plummeted like boulders. One grazed Elara's side, bruising ribs with a dull thud that drew a sharp inhale from her. She retaliated by loosing a barrage of vine arrows, the shafts embedding in the talon's underbelly and blooming into roots that pried at its armored plates. Ichor sprayed in response, the oily black fluid splattering Lirael's arm; it burned on contact, raising welts that blistered instantly, forcing her to drop and roll, her lightning chains flickering erratically. Terry's download hit eighty percent—close enough. He considered pulling back, sealing the pedestal to buy time, but the talon's tendrils were massing again, a writhing mass blocking the exit. No retreat; overload the orbs fully or risk the conduit rupturing wide. "Fuse it—everything you've got!" He poured mana into his emitter, the device whining as it built a plasma grid, superheated streams converging on the central sphere. Elara, sweat beading on her brow despite the chill draft from widening cracks, wove her remaining strength into the vines, thorny tendrils slithering across all three orbs like a living net, squeezing with relentless pressure. Lirael, favoring her injured leg, planted both hands on the grating and unleashed a torrent of lightning chains, the bolts forking wildly to link the spheres in a crackling circuit. The air ionized, hairs standing on

end as ozone overwhelmed the stench of burnt sugar from the blight. The fusion ignited in a cataclysmic roar. Plasma grids ignited the vines, superheating them into barbed whips that lacerated the orbs, while lightning surged through the lattice, shattering rune-etched surfaces in bursts of emerald fire. The central sphere exploded first, shards embedding in the talon's hide with sizzling pops, followed by the left and right detonating in tandem. The conduit convulsed, its titanic length contracting like a severed artery, forcing the talon to retract with a guttural screech that vibrated through their bones. Ichor geysered briefly, drenching the floor in steaming pools, but the orbs' overload cauterized the rupture, sealing the conduit in a crust of fused crystal and slag. Panting, Terry yanked his emitter free from the console, the full schematics secured—irrefutable proof of the syndicate's gambit to rouse the progenitor and harvest its blight for an armageddon engine. Elara slumped against a wall, clutching her bruised side, while Lirael tested her weight on her leg, wincing at the corrosive throb. Injuries mounted: gashes weeping blood, burns itching with unnatural heat, ribs protesting every breath. But victory tasted fleeting. A resonant pulse emanated from below, a deep thrum that rattled loose pebbles and set the air humming. The floor tilted subtly, drawing them inexorably toward a fresh fissure snaking open at the chamber's far end, where shadows deepened and the progenitor's stir echoed like approaching thunder. Terry gripped his emitter tighter, eyes locking on the widening gap; they had no choice but to descend, weapons priming for the plunge.

Terry edged forward, boots scraping against the tilting grating as the fissure yawned wider, its jagged lips exhaling a fetid gust laced with acrid minerals and the ever-present tang of ozone. The deep throb below grew insistent, vibrating up through his soles like a heartbeat swelling in the dark. Elara flanked him, her fingers twisting a fresh coil of vine from her wrist bracer, the growth rasping softly as thorns bloomed along its length. Lirael limped a step behind, her staff tapping the floor in rhythmic defiance, sparks dancing at its tip despite the grimace etching her face. "Grid's primed," Terry muttered, emitter humming in his grip, its vents hissing faint steam. "But if that pulse hits critical, it'll warp the whole underbelly. We drop now, or

the floor chooses for us." Elara's eyes narrowed at the gap, her free hand pressing against a buckling wall for balance. "And if it's another conduit? We overload blind, and it drags the academy down with us." Lirael's staff cracked against a loose panel, sending it skittering into the void. "Debate later. That pull's tightening—feel it in your gut?" She nodded sharply toward the fissure, her posture rigid against the strain in her leg. No more words. Terry leaped first, emitter casting a blue glow as he activated a kinetic tether, the line snapping taut from his belt to a protruding rebar spike. The drop yanked him downward, wind lashing his face, the air turning colder and thicker with each meter. Elara followed, her vine uncoiling like a lifeline to lash onto the same anchor, while Lirael vaulted last, her descent buffered by a gust she summoned, cloak billowing as if caught in an updraft. They landed in a crouch on a lower ledge, the chamber below sprawling like a cavernous wound in the earth—walls veined with pulsating black crystal, floor slick with congealing ichor that bubbled in viscous pools. The pulsing rhythm originated here, from a titanic conduit snaking across the center, thrice as thick as the one above, guarded by three new glowing orbs hovering like malignant lanterns, their surfaces etched with runes that flickered in sickly green. Before Terry could scan for access points, the conduit convulsed. A titanic talon burst from its midpoint, hulking and barbed, its hide a mosaic of crystallized flesh glistening with corrosive slime. The appendage lashed out, barbs dripping viscous ooze that hissed on contact with the stone, etching furrows that smoked and widened. Crystalline tendrils erupted from the talon's joints, whip-thin and razor-edged, scuttling across the floor like animated glass shards, their tips probing the air with faint chittering. "Orbs first—sever the conduit's anchors!" Terry barked, rolling aside as a tendril slashed where he'd stood, the impact carving a gouge that sprayed pulverized rock. He leveled his emitter, superheated plasma lancing forth in a searing bolt that struck the nearest orb, the orb shuddering as its rune surface cracked, emitting a high-pitched whine that drilled into his eardrums. Elara darted left, her vine lashing out to ensnare the second orb, thorns piercing its glow and drawing out spurts of emerald fluid that sizzled on her gloves. She yanked hard, muscles straining, the vine coiling tighter as the orb resisted, its light pulsing in retaliation. A hallucinatory wave

rippled from the contact, the air abruptly filling with the reek of smoldering leaves, Elara's vision blurring as phantom flames licked at her boots, hot enough to blister the soles before she shook it off, gritting her teeth. Lirael channeled a lightning chain from her staff, the bolt arcing to the third orb with a thunderclap that echoed off the walls, forking into sub-strands that etched glowing scars across its form. The talon reacted, swinging in a wide arc that uprooted a section of floor, hurling boulders toward her. She dodged, but a fragment clipped her shoulder, the blunt force jarring her arm and leaving it numb, a sharp ache blooming where bone protested the twist. "Flank it—joints are weak!" Terry shouted, pivoting to fire another plasma lance at the talon's elbow, the superheated stream melting a barb into slag, ichor erupting in a pressurized spray that splashed his armguard. The corrosion bit immediately, metal bubbling as if boiled, forcing him to shake it off with a hiss of pain, the skin beneath reddening in raw patches. The tendrils swarmed, converging on Elara as she wrestled her orb. One latched onto her ankle, its crystalline edge slicing through her boot, drawing a line of fire across her calf that made her stagger, blood welling hot and sticky. She retaliated by slamming her vine down, the thorns pulverizing the tendril into glittering dust, but the effort pulled at her bruised side, breath hitching in shallow bursts. Lirael pressed her assault, lightning chaining between orbs now, the circuit building static that raised the hairs on their necks. But the talon struck back, its barbed tip raking the air near her, the near-miss kicking up a gust that slammed her against a crystal-veined wall. The impact rattled her teeth, a wave of nausea surging as her vision swam, knees buckling briefly before she straightened, tasting copper on her tongue from a bitten lip. Terry patched into the central console mid-stride—a rusted pedestal half-buried in ichor—his emitter's probe jacking in with a spark. Holographic schematics flickered to life, projecting ritual diagrams: the syndicate's blueprint to flood the multiverse with progenitor blight, conduits siphoned into engines mimicking his father's old designs. "Got it—awakening protocol. They need all orbs live to pull the full entity through." "Download fast—it's spawning more!" Elara grunted, her vine finally crushing her orb, the orb imploding in a burst of acrid gas that clawed at her throat, forcing coughs that doubled her over, lungs burning as

if inhaling embers. The talon thrashed, seismic shocks rippling outward, buckling the ledge under Lirael's feet. She leaped clear, but a tendril coiled around her staff, yanking her off-balance. Lightning surged instinctively, vaporizing the crystal in a flash that left spots dancing in her eyes, temporary blindness forcing her to rely on sound—the talon's guttural scrape, the sizzle of plasma—to reposition. Terry's download hit eighty percent when the talon targeted him, barbs extending like spears. He raised a kinetic shield, the energy field shimmering as it deflected the strike, but the force reverberated through his arms, shoulders screaming from the jolt, a deep bruise forming where the impact hammered home. Ichor from the glancing hit splattered his visor, the corrosion etching a foggy streak that he wiped frantically, the acid stinging his fingertips into numb blisters. "Sync with me—fusion overload!" Terry called, emitter whining higher as he fed power to the orbs' fractures. Elara released her vine remnant, letting it slither toward the damaged orbs, thorny lattice weaving through the cracks. Lirael, shaking off the daze, funneled her stormweave into the mix, lightning chains linking the setup in a blazing web. The energies collided with a deafening crack, plasma igniting the vines into a corona of barbed flame that lashed the orbs, while lightning arced through, supercharging the runes until they fractured in sequence. The first orb detonated with a concussive boom, shrapnel pelting the talon's hide and embedding like hot needles, drawing a bellow that shook dust from the ceiling. The second orb followed, its explosion hurling Elara backward; she hit the slick floor hard, the slide grinding grit into her palms, abrading skin raw as she skidded to a halt, elbow hyperextending with a pop that sent white-hot pain lancing up her arm. Lirael's circuit peaked on the third orb, the overload ripping through the conduit like a severed cable. The talon convulsed, joints popping as corrosive barbs retracted, tendrils withering into brittle husks that shattered underfoot. It withdrew into the depths with a wet slurp, the conduit sealing over in a hasty crust of slag and crystal, steam hissing from the cauterized wound. They collapsed in a ragged trio, chests heaving, the chamber's tremors easing to a low rumble. Terry ejected the probe, schematics secure in his emitter's core—damning evidence of the ritual's scope, the progenitor's full awakening poised to crack Earth open like an egg. But the victory curdled fast. A

more intense throbbing pulsed from below, stronger now, the floor vibrating as if the entity below flexed against its bonds. Shadows in the far wall deepened, a new fissure cracking open with a groan of stone, pulling at them like an undertow—clothes tugging, boots sliding inexorably toward the edge. Elara pushed to her knees first, wincing as her elbow throbbed, blood from her calf soaking her boot. "It's not done. That pull—it's calling the whole thing up." Lirael gripped her staff, the wood slick with sweat, her shoulder's numbness giving way to a dull fire. "Then we follow. End it at the source." Terry nodded, emitter recharging with a low hum, his burned fingers flexing stiffly around the grip. They advanced, the pull guiding their steps into the gloom, weapons humming alive as the progenitor's thunder grew nearer, the air thickening with the promise of cataclysmic fury.

The gloom swallowed them whole, the fissure's jagged maw widening into a cavernous throat that reeked of scorched ozone and molten tar. Terry's boots scraped against the sloping stone, each step sucking at his soles like tar, the pull from below yanking harder now—a relentless drag that bent the air into visible ripples. Elara flanked him, her bowstring taut between clenched teeth, elbow cradled against her ribs to steady the throb. Lirael brought up the rear, staff planted like an anchor, sparks dancing along its length as if the wood itself recoiled from the heat rising through the cracks. The chamber yawned open ahead, a vast hollow gouged from the academy's bedrock, conduits of taint threading the walls like exposed arteries pulsing with oily black ichor. At its heart sprawled the progenitor's titanic conduit—a cable of flesh and crystal, thicker than a transport shuttle, throbbing in sync with the earth's core. Guarding it stood three glowing orbs, fist-sized spheres embedded in rune-etched pedestals, their surfaces crawling with azure energy that hummed a low, dissonant dirge. The air crackled, charged particles lifting fine dust into swirling eddies. Terry's emitter whirred, scanning the layout. "Orbs first. Overload them in sequence—disrupt the conduit's anchor. I'll take the left." His voice cut sharp, fingers drumming the device's casing, ignoring the raw sting from his burns. Elara nocked an arrow, the vine-wrapped shaft glowing faintly. "Middle one's mine. Vines to bind, then shatter." She shifted her weight,

boot grinding into a loose pebble that skittered toward the conduit, vanishing into a side crevice with a sizzle. Lirael exhaled a gust that cleared the dust from their path. “Right flank. Lightning chains to bridge the gaps.” Her grip tightened on the staff, knuckles whitening, the earlier numbness in her shoulder sharpening into pins that jabbed with every flex. They fanned out, circling the conduit’s perimeter, the ground quaking underfoot. Shards of crystal jutted from the floor like broken teeth, glinting with trapped light. Terry raised his emitter, palm igniting with a lance of superheated plasma that streaked toward the left orb. The beam struck true, melting a divot into the pedestal, azure energy flaring in protest as runes bubbled and popped. Yet the conduit retaliated. A rift tore open along its length, and the talon erupted anew—hulking, segmented, its hide a mosaic of blackened chitin and frozen veins, barbs dripping viscous corrosion that ate into the stone with hungry hisses. It lashed out, sweeping low, the air whistling as barbs hooked toward Elara’s legs. She leaped, twisting mid-air, her arrow loosing a coil of thorny vines that lashed around the talon’s wrist joint. The barbs snagged, tearing fabric from her trousers, but the vines held, thorns burrowing deep, drawing spurts of dark ooze that splashed hot across her shin. She landed rolling, the impact jarring her elbow and numbing it, fresh blood welling from the abraded skin. “Keep on the orbs!” Terry barked, dodging a flung barb that embedded in the wall behind him, stone fracturing in a web of cracks. He fired another plasma lance, the heat wave singeing his sleeve, supercharging the left orb’s conduits until azure bolts arced wildly, scorching the air. From the talon’s tip, swarms of crystalline tendrils burst forth—razor whips uncoiling like serpents, their edges humming with rimefire that chilled the chamber’s swelter. Lirael swung her staff, summoning a chain of lightning that forked through the swarm, vaporizing a dozen in bursts of steam and shattered facets. Fragments rained down, slicing her forearm in shallow lines that burned like frostbite, blood freezing in crimson beads. The middle orb flared brighter under Elara’s assault. She drove her vines into its base, roots cracking the pedestal as they sought purchase. The talon bucked, tendrils converging on her, barbs raking the air inches from her face. One grazed her shoulder, corrosion searing through cloth and flesh, the smell of burnt sugar overwhelming as she stifled a gasp, jaw locking

tight. “Download starting,” Terry muttered, emitter probing the left orb’s fracturing shell. Holographic schematics flickered to life above his wrist—blueprints of ritual arrays, convergence points etched in glowing lines, the syndicate’s hand clear in the twisted Nexus-weave signatures. His father’s mark stared back, a ghost in the code. The pull intensified, boots sliding another inch toward the conduit. Lirael chained her lightning to the right orb, the torrent grounding through the pedestal in a web of crackling blue. The talon reared, barbs flexing like claws, and slammed down, seismic shock rippling the floor. Terry stumbled, plasma lance veering wide, scorching a gouge in the conduit’s hide that seeped taint in steaming rivulets. The liquid splashed his boot, eating through the sole, acid biting into his ankle with white-hot precision. Elara’s vines tightened on the middle orb, thorns grinding runes to dust. But hallucinatory assaults bloomed—phantom insects swarming from the walls, their wings a blur of illusory barbs that solidified mid-strike, lancing toward her eyes. She batted one away with her bow, the impact bruising her knuckles, real blood mixing with the fake as the visions clawed for purchase. “Phantoms—focus through!” Lirael roared, her chain peaking, the right orb erupting in a fountain of sparks that lit the chamber like a dying star. Tendrils recoiled from the blast, but the talon pressed, its joint grinding against Elara’s bindings, barbs secreting more corrosion that withered the vines in sizzling segments. Terry synced his emitter to the schematics, data streaming into his core—ritual to awaken the progenitor fully, conduits linking to multiversal engines, Earth’s crust as the forge. “It’s all here. Syndicate’s endgame—crack the planet, birth their army.” His voice held an edge, emitter’s hum rising as he poured plasma into the left orb’s heart. The sphere detonated, shockwave hurling crystalline shards that peppered Lirael’s back, embedding like icy needles, her stance buckling as she bit back a hiss. The talon thrashed, joints popping under the strain. Elara released her spent vines, drawing a fresh arrow that bloomed into a thorny net, hurling it at the limb’s elbow. It wrapped tight, barbs piercing chitin, foul ooze spraying in arcs that splattered the trio—corrosive droplets hissing on skin, raising welts on Terry’s neck, blistering Lirael’s cheek. “Joint—sever it now!” Elara grunted, nocking another shaft, her free hand pressing against the burn on her shoulder, fingers coming away slick. Lirael funneled

her storm into a concentrated bolt, the lightning arcing from staff to talon, superheating the barbs until they glowed cherry-red and snapped. Terry followed with a plasma grid, the lattice weaving through the talon's joint like a saw, chitin melting in dripping globs that pooled and hardened into glassy spikes. The talon spasmed, tendrils flailing wildly, one lashing across Terry's chest, tearing emitters from his harness in a spray of sparks. Walls buckled inward, stone groaning as seismic shocks rippled from the conduit's core. Dust cascaded, mixing with hallucinatory fog that conjured spectral enforcers—ghostly figures lunging with solid blades that clanged off Lirael's improvised wind shield, the gust scattering them but draining her, breath coming in ragged pulls. Elara's second arrow struck the middle orb, vines exploding outward in a binding cage that crushed the sphere's shell. Azure energy lashed back, electrocuting the roots, feedback jolting up her arm to her elbow, the joint screaming anew. She dropped to one knee, vision blurring from the pain, but the orb shattered, pedestal toppling into the conduit with a thunderous crack. The talon's severed joint gushed viscous taint, the limb convulsing as tendrils withered, retracting into the depths with guttural scrapes. Terry staggered forward, emitter jacked into the final pedestal remnant, pulling the last schematics—progenitor's lair mapped, awakening thresholds detailed, syndicate codes interlocking with his father's old prototypes. Lirael struck the third orb with a final chain, lightning fusing with residual plasma from Terry's grid. The overload built, energies colliding in a cataclysmic fusion: plasma's roar merging with lightning's crackle, vines from Elara's earlier strikes threading through like fuses. The orb imploded, a dome of force expanding outward, slamming the talon's remnants back into the fissure. The conduit sealed over in a hasty bulge of crystal and slag, steam venting in furious jets that scalded the air. They slumped against the shuddering walls, emitters flickering low, bows and staff dimming. Terry's burned fingers fumbled the emitter shut, schematics locked. Elara wiped the sticky residue from her face, the corrosion etching faint scars across her jaw. Lirael's shoulder hung limp, blood crusting her wounds. But the chamber didn't still. A deep throb pulsed from below, deeper, hungrier—the progenitor stirring inexorably, its thunder vibrating through bone. The floor tilted, cracks spidering outward, the pull yanking them toward a yawning pit that split

the conduit's base. Terry's hand shot out, grabbing Elara's arm as her boot slipped over the edge, the void below exhaling a gust laced with burnt sugar. Lirael lunged, staff hooking Terry's belt, hauling them back inch by inch as the pit widened, stones tumbling into the dark with echoing splashes.

Lirael's boots scraped across the fracturing stone, her good arm straining against the staff's leverage, cords of muscle bulging under her sleeve as she yanked. Terry's grip on Elara tightened, knuckles whitening, the emitter's heat searing his palm where it pressed against her wrist. Elara's free hand clawed at a protruding root—her own conjured vine, now brittle from the overload—fingers digging into its fibrous bark until splinters bit her skin. The pit's edge crumbled further, a chunk the size of a lectern shearing off and plummeting into the gloom. Echoes bounced back, wet and muffled, like stones sinking into tar. The air thickened with that ozone tang, undercut by the cloying rot of burnt sugar, pulling at their clothes like invisible fingers. "Pull—now!" Terry barked, his voice raw from the chamber's earlier roar. He twisted his torso, planting his heels into a seam of uncracked floor, the jolt rattling his knees. Elara's legs kicked for purchase, one boot wedging against a lip of jagged crystal. She hauled upward, using Terry's anchor, her breath exploding in sharp bursts that fogged the chill draft rising from below. With a final heave, Lirael reeled them in, the three collapsing in a tangle of limbs and gear against the chamber's far wall. The pit yawned wider, a fissure now ten paces across, its sides glistening with oily residue that dripped in slow, viscous strands. Steam hissed from the depths, carrying flecks of crystalline grit that stung their exposed skin like needle pricks. Terry shoved himself upright first, emitter clutched in his singed hand, the device whining faintly as its core cooled. He scanned the schematics on its cracked display—lines of glowing runes mapping the progenitor's lair, thresholds marked in red: awakening at eighty percent, syndicate overrides keyed to paternal codes. His jaw clenched, teeth grinding audibly. "We bought time. That's the conduit's seal holding. But this..." He jabbed a finger at the pit. "This is the anchor point. It's waking." Elara pushed to her knees, rubbing her wrist where his grip had left red welts. She flexed her elbow, wincing as the joint popped, fresh pain lancing up her arm

from the earlier feedback. “Time for what? Your father’s ghosts in that data? Or more of these talons ripping us apart?” Her tone carried an edge, not accusation, but a probe—like testing a frayed rope before trusting it. Lirael rolled to a sit, shoulder sagging as she probed the wound with her staff’s tip. Blood welled anew, soaking her tunic in dark patches. She didn’t meet their eyes, just stared at the pit, her free hand balling into a fist against the stone. “Doesn’t matter. It’s coming. Feel that?” The pulse swelled anew, a low vibration rumbling through the floor, vibrating in their chests like a second heartbeat. Dust sifted from the ceiling, pattering down in fine sheets. Terry synced his emitter to the downloaded map, the holographic overlay flickering to life above his palm—conduits branching like roots under the academy’s foundations, converging on a central chamber labeled “Progenitor Core.” Red pulses raced along the lines, accelerating. He traced a conduit with his thumb, the light bending under his touch. “The ritual’s orbs were guards. Destroyed them, but the core’s drawing power from below. Syndicate’s using the academy’s nexus as a battery. If we don’t sever the main conduit—” A tremor shook the chamber, fiercer this time. Cracks raced across the walls, spiderwebbing from the pit’s rim. Chunks of ceiling calved off, one crashing near Elara’s foot with a crack like thunder, spraying shards that sliced shallow lines across her calf. She yelped, more from surprise than pain, and clapped a hand over the cuts, blood seeping between her fingers. “Move!” Lirael surged to her feet, staff whipping up a gust that buffeted the falling debris aside. The wind howled, lashing her hair into a frenzy, but it tugged at her injured shoulder, forcing a grimace as she staggered. They scrambled toward the chamber’s arched exit, a narrow passage choked with buckled stone. Terry led, emitter raised like a lantern, its beam cutting through the gloom. The floor bucked beneath them, throwing Elara off balance; she pitched forward, her hip crashing against a jutting beam. Pain flared hot and deep, bruising the bone, but she bit down a curse and pushed on, limping in his wake. The passage narrowed, walls pressing in, slick with seeping corruption that hummed against their skin. Tendrils—no, echoes of the talon’s remnants—stirred in the cracks, thin filaments writhing like awakened worms. One lashed out at Lirael’s ankle, barbs hooking fabric and drawing a thin line of blood before she stomped it flat, the crunch echoing wetly.

"These aren't dead," Elara muttered, nocking an arrow as she ran. Her fingers trembled slightly on the string, the welts from Terry's grip throbbing in rhythm with her pulse. "Your seal's fraying already." Terry didn't turn, his shoulders hunching as he blasted a cluster of filaments with a plasma lance. The bolt struck true, superheating the growths into molten slag that splattered the wall, bubbling craters into the stone. The acrid stench of vaporized blight filled the air, clinging to their throats. "It's the pull. Progenitor's resonating—drawing everything toward it. We follow the map, hit the core conduit before it fully surfaces." Lirael's response was a snort, half-laugh, half-scoff, as she channeled a lightning chain into a writhing mass ahead. The bolt arced, forking into blue-white conduits that charred the tendrils to ash, the flash leaving afterimages burned into their vision. "Your maps. Your father's toys. And we're the ones bleeding for it." She shook out her hand, sparks dancing off her fingertips, the effort making her limp shoulder buckle. The passage opened into a wider vault, its ceiling vaulted like a cathedral but scarred by fresh fissures. Holographic emitters—syndicate relics—flickered on rusted pedestals, projecting fractured logs: paternal voice droning about "stable weaves for multiversal anchors," overlaid with newer codes twisting them into weaponized spikes. Terry jacked his device into one, downloading furiously, the connection sparking as corruption interfered. Elara covered him, loosing a vine arrow into a ceiling crack where barbs glinted. Thorny ropes erupted, coiling around the fissure and yanking it shut with a grind of stone. But the strain pulled at her elbow, the joint locking for a heartbeat, forcing her to drop the bow and clutch it, breath hissing through clenched teeth. The pulse intensified, the vault's floor rippling like water under a stone's throw. A deep throb rolled up from the depths, slamming into them like a physical wave. Terry flew back, the pedestal crumpling under him, his ribs compressing with a sharp crack that stole his air. He gasped, curling fetal as each inhale stabbed fire into his side. Lirael braced against the wall, the force hurling her into it shoulder-first; the collision wrenched her wound open wider, fresh blood spraying in an arc. She slid down, vision swimming, ears ringing with a high-pitched whine that drowned the rumble. Elara dug her heels in, vines snaking from her boots to anchor her, but the throb sheared them, sending her sprawling. She hit the

ground rolling, the jolt twisting her ankle with a sickening pop, swelling instant and hot. She came up cursing, drawing a dagger to slash at a tendril snaking toward her throat. “Data’s in,” Terry wheezed, forcing himself up on one arm, the other cradling his side. Each movement ground the fractured rib, breath shallow and ragged. “Core’s fifty meters down. Main conduit exposed there. We overload it—” Another throb hit, weaker but insidious, hallucinatory edges creeping in. Shadows twisted into spectral enforcers, blades materializing mid-swing. Lirael swung her staff, wind shattering one illusion into harmless mist, but the effort buckled her knee, forcing her to lean on the wall, sweat beading on her brow. Elara’s dagger cleaved a phantom arm, the strike jarring her swollen ankle, pain lancing up her leg like a hot poker. “Overload how? With what? We’re running on fumes.” Her voice cracked, not fear, but the weight of it—eyes flicking to Terry’s hunched form, then Lirael’s bloodied shoulder. The vault shuddered, a low groan echoing as the far wall split, revealing a descending chute slick with viscous taint. The pull strengthened, yanking gear toward the edge—Lirael’s staff skittering inches before she pinned it with her boot. Terry straightened, emitter humming as he synced the new data. “Together. Plasma to breach, vines to bind, lightning to ignite. It’s physical—sever the conduit like an artery.” He extended a hand to Elara, pulling her up; she took it, grip firm despite the wince crossing her face. They edged toward the chute, the air growing heavier, the burnt-sugar reek choking. Lirael limped after, staff as crutch, her free hand pressing a makeshift tourniquet—torn cloth clamped above her shoulder wound—to stem the seep of corruption from an embedded crystal shard. The descent began, ropes conjured from Elara’s dwindling reserves snaking down the chute’s walls. But as they rappelled, the pulse crescendoed, the chute’s sides throbbing in sync. A talon—no, a tendril thicker than the last—erupted from below, barbs scraping stone in a shower of sparks. It lashed upward, coiling toward Lirael’s leg. She kicked free, the motion tearing the tourniquet loose, corruption flecking her skin in oily spots. Terry fired a plasma lance mid-drop, the beam grazing the tendril, searing a gash that oozed steaming taint. The recoil jerked his harness, grinding his rib anew, vision spotting black. Elara’s vines lashed out, thorns embedding in the flesh, but the tendril bucked, yanking her sideways. She slammed into the wall,

breath exploding from her lungs, the collision bruising her spine and leaving her dangling limp for a heartbeat. Lightning from Lirael forked down, chaining along the barbs, the sizzle filling the chute with blinding light. The tendril convulsed, retracting with a slithering retreat, but not before its tip grazed Terry's boot, acid eating through the sole and blistering his toes in instant agony. They hit the bottom in a heap, the chamber below a throbbing heart of conduits and crystal. The progenitor's core loomed—a titanic bulge in the floor, cracking open like an egg. But from the widening seam, something vast shifted, scales grinding against stone.

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